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GRIP-SACK SID WAS JUST IN TIME TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE STAGE
AS IT TOPPLED OVER.

OR,

Grip-Sack Sid at Rocky Comfort.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "NOR'-WEST NICK,"
"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FIRE IN THE MOUNTAINS.

"REMINDS me of the good old times when I used to elope from school with rod and line."

"Huh?" grunted the driver, but without breaking that steady, anxious gaze ahead.

"Because I knew I had to catch a mess or catch a licking. And as our noblest fish were sunfish and suckers, things looked mighty scaly either way. So—mighty scaly, pardner!"

"That's what!"

"And getting no better mighty fast. How much further have we got to go before clearing the timber, Topsy?"

"Six mild—no less," with an uneasy snort, as he deftly knocked a glowing cinder from his off-leader's haunch before it could scorch through hair to hide, the sharp snap of the silken cracker

sending the four-in-hand along a bit more briskly. "Stiddy, lads!"

Sidney Harper shot a side-glance into the face of Topsy Todd, under whose guidance the dingy old stage was running from Probabi'y to Rocky Comfort. It seemed an ominous title for one on whose nerve and presence of mind five other lives in a measure depended; but he was experienced enough in wild Western life to know that nicknames sometimes called for a backward reading, and this grave, strong if homely face, was not that of a drunkard.

While making that mental observation, Harper was opening the neat "grip-sack" of alligator leather which hung against his left hip, and bringing forth a plated flask, he removed its cap and let the scent of brandy second his invitation:

"Take a nip, pardner. It's a sample of Our Best, and when—"

"Put 'er up; I never tetch it. An' ef I did, 'tain't now I'd want the cussed p'izen blurrin' the two eyes o' me. Put 'er up, I say!"

"Never touch it?" echoed Harper, with seeming incredulity.

"Never hev an' never will. That's why they call me Topsy Todd. Ef you reckon fire inside kin help fire outside, drink *you!* But, I'd hate most mightily to hev to face the Lord afore the devil's brew hed time to dry off the lips o' me—I would so!"

"Then you really reckon?" hesitated Harper, returning the flask to his grip, its contents untouched.

"You kin see fer your own self, sir," grunted the driver, pulling up his team as they reached a point in the road from whence a fairly comprehensive view could be obtained. "An' when you've hed your look, you kin make your choice: turn back, or keep ahead."

"And you, Todd?"

"My run's from Probability to Rocky Comfort. I don't say I'll keep schedule time, this trip, but I *do* say I'll go through: to Rocky Comfort or to Eternity."

From other lips those words might have seemed boastful; like a tiresome lad whistling to keep up his courage in the dark; but as Grip-sack looked, he believed. Topsy Todd meant to "go through on time" if mortal man could hold out against such odds.

On every side rolled clouds of smoke, curling and twining as little eddies of air swept through the hills. Here and there a column of flame told where a tree rose high above the stunted bushes and scrub-pine, while the air was filled with the vicious crackling, snapping sound of gas-filled stems exploding before the intense heat.

"What's aildin' ye, up thar?" called out a strong voice from the lowered window, followed by a shaggy head with up-turned eyes.

Just then came a heavy sound from the rear, as of a falling mass, and the two men occupying the box-seat cast a swift look backward.

Only a few hundred yards away, a tall tree, eaten off at its base by the fire, had crashed down across the narrow road, forming a blockade which must momentarily grow worse as the flames crawled toward the dense mass of splintered branches.

"That settles your turn-back, pard!" grimly muttered Todd, with a glance into the face of his outside passenger.

"You've got an ax aboard," was the swift response. "That's soft wood, and we can muster strong arms enough for the job. Only—will we better ourselves any by turning back?"

"Reckon it looks that way?" grunted the driver. "You see fer yourself it tuck hard drivin' to pass the p'int afore the fire cut us off. Now—waal, crawlin' through a furnace *mought* be wuss, but not much!"

"How much better show will we have by going ahead?"

"I ain't sayin', as to that, nur as to you-all. Fer me, I'm 'xpected at Rocky Comfort this evenin', an' ef I don't git thar, it'll be beca'se tryin's no good."

"I say, you Topsy Todd!" again called forth that strong voice. "Ef you're clean roasted dead, why don't ye *say* so?"

"I'm jest a-lookin', Dan Gregg," called back the driver. "Mebbe you-all better step out fer a bit an' help do it. Things is red-hot an' still a-heatin'!"

"Don't forget that you've got a lady aboard, old man," muttered Harper, before swinging himself to the rocky roadway. "Touch as lightly as conscience'll let you, Topsy!"

With left hand supporting the grip that hung from swivel and strap, the outside passenger was at the door before another could follow big Dan Gregg, and off came his derby with smile and bow as his keen eyes met an anxious, inquiring gaze.

"Merely a matter of form, Miss Porter. Our driver always breathes his team here for a bit, and he thought maybe his passengers might like to view the prospect, so—"

"Waal, ef they kin like *this* prospect, then I don't 'mire tha'r taste!" bluntly cut in Dan Gregg, whose keen eyes had been taking in their surroundings from his perch on one hind wheel. "Topsy, ef ye hain't drunk, then you've clean lost yer wits!"

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated another one of the "insides," known as Billy Carter, his huge red mustaches fairly writhing with mingled fear and anger as he took in the peril which menaced them all. "Turn and go back! You've got to go back, Topsy Todd!"

The driver cast a look backward, his gaze lingering for a brief space on the blazing barricade so recently built up across the road, then turned his attention once more to his uneasy team.

By this time the stage was empty, Harper assisting the third and fourth passengers to alight, his frank smile as pleasant for father as for daughter, though there might have been some slight difference in the clasp of his strong fingers.

Leaving Anthony Porter, the father, to care for himself, Harper deftly guided Enid Porter to a bit of rising rock beside the road, from whence she could obtain a clearer view of their surroundings. And while she was doing this, unconsciously supporting herself by leaning with gloved hand on his shoulder, Grip-sack Sid was placidly admiring her lithe, graceful figure, her fair, almost beautiful face.

He had learned her name, with that of her parent, when he found out who were billed for the stage at Probability; but until now he had been forced to content himself with a passing glimpse of a very attractive face and figure.

Enid Porter was still in her 'teens, though evidently not far from the completion of her second decade. Her hair was brown, her eyes blue as the unclouded sky of summer. Her cheeks were robbed of their usual tinge of color by the unexpected peril which seemed to menace them from all sides, but as he quietly took notes, Sidney Harper mentally decided that, lady born and bred though Enid Porter surely was, in time of need she could and would play the heroine equal to the best.

"Enid, daughter!" cried Mr. Porter, gaining her side and giving Harper a keen glance as he relieved him of that unconscious weight. "You are very kind, sir, but—"

"Never mention it, sir; it cost me nothing," laughed Harper, a brief twinkle of malice in his shrewd gray eyes as he read aright that frosty bow. "How do you like the prospect, anyway?"

"There is no actual danger, papa?"

"I hope not—I trust there is no real peril," hesitated Mr. Porter, but with little confidence in his own words as he gazed around them, taking note of the swirling smoke, the blazing trees, the ominous roar and crackle of the devouring flames.

"Reckon you hain't got none o' that trust to sell, boss?" grunted big Dan Gregg, dropping from his perch on the wheel. "I don't advertise to be easy skeered, but I'm beginnin' fer to feel mighty wobbly 'bout the knee-jints right now—I be, fer a scan'alous fact!"

"We can't turn back—the road is blocked!" cried Billy Carter, his face paler than ever, his ferocious mustaches seeming to lose their curl in the face of peril.

"An' the longer we stop hyar chinnin', the wuss matters is growin' on ahead," put in Topsy Todd, settling himself once more in his seat, a dogged look coming into his brown eyes. "All aboard, ef you're gwine the route 'long o' me, leddy, an' you, gents!"

"You cain't mean it, Topsy!" cried Gregg, sharply, flinging out one brawny hand in emphasis. "Looky yender! It'd mean roast, so quick you wouldn't hev time to hear yourself sizzle!"

"We can't turn back. What's left but to go ahead?"

"Take to the rocks, an' lay low ontel the fire burns itself out. That's what I'm gwine to do, fer one!"

"Luck go with ye, Dan," grimly nodded the driver.

"So'll you all, ef ye hain't turned plum crazy," added Gregg, with a swift glance from face to face. "The fire's done crossed the road by this. Thar's a bare chainece ye mought pull through, but I'd hate to gamble onto it. So, I'm fer layin' low!"

"What is your opinion, sir?" asked Anthony Porter, turning an anxious look upon Sidney Harper, who seemed the coolest member of their little company. "I ask for my daughter's sake, not my own."

Harper flashed a keen glance toward Enid, then looked up at Todd.

"What do you say, driver? I'm new to these parts, but you ought to be posted. Can you pull us through in safety?"

"I kin do my level best, boss."

"Of course, but is that best good enough?"

"Waal, ef I was to say thar wasn't no resk, I'd be lyin', but I'm goin' to try."

"Call it *fry*, an' you'll come a mighty sight nigher the truth, old man," put in Dan Gregg, with a grim laugh. "Mind," with a glance at his fellow passengers, "I'm not sayin' that Todd's best isn't fully equal to that of the next man, be he who ye like; but the way matters look now, I'd lay long odds ag'inst makin' Rocky Comfort. An' so, as I said afore, I'm gwine to take my chainece layin' out 'mongst the rocks ontel the wu'st o' the fire burns out."

"Then you think there is still worse ahead of us?"

"I don't *think*, I *jest knows* it!"

"Not afore we kin make Little Crick Gulch, Gregg."

"I'm gwine to do better'n make it, Dan," with a defiant nod as he gathered up the lines. "I'm gwine to make Rocky Comfort, as well!"

CHAPTER II.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

SIDNEY HARPER had taken up a position from whence he could watch both men, and with his wits on edge, he was trying to read each face in turn.

Dan Gregg, a tall, broad-shouldered, athletic fellow of fifty-odd years, surely was not a man to be easily frightened, while he seemed thoroughly familiar with that section of the country. If he deliberately chose to take his chances there, with roaring flames on all sides, and nothing better than bare rocks to afford him shelter from the heat, already very oppressive, and soon to grow worse, surely the danger ahead must be great.

On the other hand, Topsy Todd both spoke and looked doggedly, like an obstinate man who will not listen to reason, even while secretly recognizing its value. Then, too, he suffered from physical contrast.

He was under rather than over the average height, slouchy in looks and action. His shoulders were rounded almost to deformity, and though he was muscular enough, it seemed the dull, loggy powers of a lout.

His face was homely enough, yet it possessed a certain indescribable strength which steadily grew upon the observant stranger. It was the face of a man who could do as well as dare, and Sidney Harper was keen enough judge of human nature to interpret that look aright.

"You think you can make the rifle, driver?" he called out, after one more glance at the threatening prospect around them.

"Ef I don't, 'twon't be fer lack o' tryin'," came the response. "I'm hyar to do my level best fer my passengers, but ef they don't like what I kin offer, I cain't force 'em to take it. So, all aboard, ef you're gwine 'long o' me!"

"If we were all men, 'twould be different," hastily said Harper to Anthony Porter, who still looked undecided. "We could fight it out here among the rocks, but a lady—that's different!"

"You think, then—"

"That you had better stick to the stage—yes," answered Harper, decisively. "It surely can't be much worse ahead, and by a bold dash we may pull through without even a scorch. I'll be outside, and if it looks too desperate, I'll call a halt in time, be sure."

Enid finally settled the matter by entering the stage, undeterred by the ominous frown and muttered warning given by Dan Gregg.

"You hain't sech a dug-gun fool, Billy Carter!" the big fellow blurted out, as the trim-built little gambler also turned toward the swinging door. "You hain't gwine help make that a sure-nough hearse afore its time?"

"Reckon I'll stick by the lay-out, Dan," with a sickly grin. "I've paid my passage, and I always want a show for my money, don't you see?"

"I'm seein' heap sight more than'll ever make Rocky Comfort, anyway," grunted the big fellow, drawing his belt a hole tighter, then leaving the road for the rocks, without another glance backward.

"Keep the windows up, and you'll suffer less from the smoke," said Harper, closing the door after them, forcing a smile of encouragement to pale-faced Enid as he turned away to nimbly climb on top. "Now, old man, prove your faith by your works! Let 'em went, Topsy!"

"Mebbe you'd better take the ribbons," growled Todd, with a scowl, holding his uneasy team well in hand while sending them along at a brisk trot.

"No hurry, mate. I'll see how you pan out, first."

"Then you'd raally be fool 'nough to try it on?" scowling squarely into that strong, resolute face.

"Not only try, but do it, if I saw you losing your nerve, old man," was the prompt retort. "My motto is 'get there, sharp!' And while I'd hate to hurt any man's feelings, I would do even so much rather than run any risk of *not* getting there with both feet. See?"

Just here the road ran level and comparatively smooth for a short distance, and Todd took advantage of it to more closely inspect his passenger.

He saw an athletic figure, neatly dressed in a business suit, with a derby hat rakishly cocked over a close crop of brown hair. He saw a smooth-shorn face, strong rather than handsome, though the features were fairly regular in themselves. He saw a square chin and rather wide mouth, with full, red lips. And, more than any other feature, he took particular note of those deep-set gray eyes—not large, but strangely keen and full of fire just then.

His age might have been anywhere between thirty and forty years, with the chances in

favor of a just average between those two points.

Todd had seen him first when he came out of the hotel at Probability to take the stage, booked for Rocky Comfort, the western limit of his "run," and with the customary off-hand guess with which drivers sum up their human freight, Topsy had set him down as one of that nearly ubiquitous class known as "drummers."

This opinion seemed confirmed by the easy, glib conversation with which Sidney Harper, as he gave his name, had regaled him up to the time when the rapidly spreading fire in the mountains rendered idle talk out of the question; but now Topsy Todd began to have his doubts.

No mere traveling man, new to that country, would wear that manner or make use of such bluntly calm words in the face of such peril as now confronted them.

"All right," he assented, grimly, once more giving his attention to his horses. "You kin talk right pert. Mehbe you kin act, too, when the tight pinch comes."

"Don't run any risks trying to satisfy your curiosity, Tippy," the man with the grip-sack rejoined. "I'd heap sight rather do the bossing, while I can make just as good wages, and I'll not chip in as long as you do good work, be sure."

"That's lucky—fer you!"

"Think so? All right. Now, what's the show for making Rocky Comfort, old man?"

"Jest what you said a bit back yender: mighty sealy!"

"Yet you advised us to stick to the hearse?"

"You're off, stranger. I said I was gwine to pull through ef any one man could make the raffle. I told you-all to take your choice. You 'cluded to stick, an' stick goes. See?"

"Have it so, then. Once more: you think there is a show for getting there, don't you, man?"

"A show—yes," rising to his feet for an instant, the better to ascertain what lay ahead. "Ef we kin pass through one stretch o' timber afore the fire clean blocks the road, we'll make the raffle like a mice."

"And if the way should be blocked before we reach that point?"

"Waal, you-all kin reach out fer 'nother chaine. Ef you kin git down in Little Crick Gulch, I reckon you'll make it all right. Ef Dan Gregg hedn't pulled out—but pull out he did!"

"How could he help us out?"

"Waal, he knows pritty nigh every foot o' this range, an' he could easy show you the road to Rocky Comfort, wust come to wust. Thar's Billy Carter, who's lived pritty nigh as long in these parts as Dan, but—waal, he knows heap sight more 'bout keards than he does 'bout hill-work. He'd be a hender, ruther than a help, I reckon!"

"What's the matter with you for a guide?"

"The hoss never wore iron that could git into Little Creek Gulch alive, from this side; that's all the matter."

"But if we find the way blocked, and the horses can't save you, of course you'll look out for yourself?"

"What'll I do with my team?"

"Turn 'em loose to shift for themselves, of course!"

For some little time there was silence, and Grip-sack Sid fancied the driver was weighing that hint in his mind; but when Topsy Todd did speak, that mistake was made evident.

"You don't know me, stranger, to talk sech words. An' you don't know hoss-natur', nuther, or you wouldn't make sech a fool' break. Look at them beauties; don't you see tha'r hides jest crawlin' up an' down? See tha'r ears shiver—look how tha'r eyes bug out? Don't that begin to tell ye how turrible bad skeered they be? Don't you know how wild all hosses is when it comes to facin' fire? Waal, ef they felt my han's feelin' o' tha'r mouths! Ef they hearn my voice bid 'em git-thar! they'd trot right up to the gates o' hell itself!"

"I'm mighty glad to hear as much," as he gazed ahead at the flame-pierced smoke; "for a man with a lively imagination of his own wouldn't have to stretch it seriously to fancy that those very gates were yawning for us, right yonder!"

"It's nasty, but thar's heap sight wuss ahead," bluntly avowed Todd, sending a thrill of encouragement along the ribbons as his team showed signs of faltering. "An' seein' how well we know each other, me and them beauties, you kin talk o' my turnin' 'em loose to shift fer tha'r-selves, while I hunt a hole too little fer them to crawl out o' death into?"

Harper gazed keenly into that hard-set face, something of admiration coming into his own visage as he answered:

"But if sticking to the team meant your death, without saving them, old fellow?"

"Whar they go, I go. Now, button up! The fu'st tug is comin', an' ef you want to help save yen' young woman, in thar, jest hang tight an' keep a-prayin' that nothin' o' harm comes to me, fer nobody else kin fetch the good work out o' this yer' team. Git thar, boys!"

Truly, it was an ugly prospect that confront-

ed them, just then, as a brisk gust of heated air cleared away the dense smoke that hung over the trail.

For more than a hundred yards the right hand side of the road was lined with trees, large and small, all of them fairly ablaze, and more than one leaning across the stage-road, as though already trembling for a fall.

Not one team out of ten thousand could have been forced to pass so near a blaze like that, and despite the confidence which Topsy had so recently expressed in his animals, Sid Harper fully expected a miserable failure now. And that would mean almost certain death!

"Steady! Hold 'em level! If they'shy, we're gone!" he cried as the snorting team plunged forward, stung by the lash and encouraged by the well-known voice of their friend and master.

"You shet! G'lang, my dandies!" holding them straight, and sending them under that first fiery arch.

Straight as a die they ran, true to their master even while those hungry tongues of flame shot out to scorch and crisp their sweat-dampened hair, and as he saw this, even while crouching to protect his own skin, Grip-sack Sid could not refrain from giving an approving shout.

"Glorious!" he cried, as that leaning column of fire was left behind them, and they had a chance to catch a comparatively free breath. "I never thought to see such work! Both man and horses are—Look out, man!"

The swiftly-trotting team had carried them to the second point of greater peril, and while giving vent to his admiration, Sid instinctively cast a glance upward: just in time to see a blazing limb part from its parent trunk, and shoot swiftly downward!

He thought to fling out a warding hand, but before he could do more than begin the motion, the falling limb struck Topsy fairly on the head, covering them both with sparks and stinging fire.

Harper felt, rather than saw, the driver sink before that heavy blow, and instinctively he gripped the luckless fellow with one hand, at the same time making a blind clutch for the lines. He saved Todd from falling off the box, but with his eyes full of sparks and ashes, he missed the reins as those unnerved fingers dropped them, and in that awful moment he realized all that meant, not only to himself, but to those still more helpless inmates of the coach beneath him.

For, no longer beld in check by the strong hands they had learned to trust so blindly, the frightened team was running away, each moment increasing their speed, now that the level was passed and the long slope fairly entered upon. And, to add to his peril, Grip-sack Sid felt Topsy Todd slipping out of his grasp!

CHAPTER III.

GRIP-SACK SID'S LEAP FOR LIFE.

A HEAVY jolt as the wheels on one side struck a projecting rock, caused the coach to lurch on its yielding springs, almost tearing the body of Topsy Todd from the clutch so imperfectly fastened upon it by the man on the box.

It would be so easy to let it go, and every second of time was so precious, just then! With each passing moment the unguided horses were increasing their speed, that heavy vehicle gaining a truly dangerous momentum.

But, Sid Harper was true to the core, and blinded as he was for the time being, he followed that dragging weight far enough to secure a grip with both hands, even while expecting to share a fall which could hardly help but prove fatal.

One desperate effort, then the limp form of the driver was jerked back from over the whirling wheel, held firmly upon the box while the Get-there Sharp did all he could to clear his eyes from ashes with the one hand left at liberty.

It seemed so long, yet only a few seconds of time had passed since the fall of that glowing limb, and now that his eyesight began to return to him, Grip-sack Sid could see that the four horses, though so frightened, so wholly unrestrained, had not entirely cast off the influence of their loved and loving master.

This was proven by their still keeping to the road as it curved to the right, for on that side alone grew the trees, up whose trunks and along whose branches the flames were creeping, dropping the crackling needles in fiery showers, shooting forth great tongues of flames as though hungry for still more precious prey.

"Steady, lads!" he called out, doing his best to imitate the voice of Todd on the frail chance of deceiving the runaways. "Steady!"

His sight was cleared enough now to show him the lines, far beyond his reach, dragging the ground, and one of them already shortened by one of those iron-shod hoofs. Even as he looked, another end was caught under a jolting wheel, the sudden jerk throwing the leaders out of their stride, and threatening to bring all to wreck just where such an accident could hardly mean less than death to them all!

Indistinct cries and shouts came to his ears from the interior of the coach, but he gave them no heed, nor did he attempt to answer back.

The inside passengers were even more helpless than himself, since they could not even look at the coming death.

"Steady, lads!" he repeated, lifting his voice high to overpower that ugly roaring of flames as well as the rattle and clash of iron against rock.

With a vigorous jerk he dragged Topsy further along the seat, bracing himself against the footboard as he did this. Then, deftly, he shifted positions, pushing back against the seemingly dead driver, to hold him in place, at the same time throwing all his weight on the brake.

With a jerk and a jar the brake-shoe took hold, sending a painful shock up his leg, almost as though the bones were splintering. A shower of sparks flashed from the flinty road-bed, and the heavy stage seemed to jump, rather than roll, swaying dangerously from side to side, yet perceptibly checking that mad speed.

Sid could see this, for the bent tugs straightened out with a twang as the wheelers plunged on. That shock nearly pitched him off the box, but he tightened his grip on the iron rail, and shoved down on the brake with still more desperate force.

After that one brief check, all the difference those locked wheels made lay in giving the frightened horses a bit more work to do: they pulled the stage, instead of its keeping close to their heels through its own momentum. Where he had hoped to check them by degrees, he saw that this drag was only rendering them wilder, more dangerous to the lives behind them.

"There's only one way, and I've got to get there!" flashed through his busy brain as he realized all this.

With Sid Harper, to resolve was to attempt, and he acted none the less quickly because he knew that failure meant certain death to himself. All he asked was a chance, and that lay before him!

Only the pressure of his own body had kept the senseless driver from being pitched off the box, and precious though the moments were now, Sidney Harper used half a score of them in care for poor Todd.

Twisting the tail of Todd's coat under and over the rail back of the box-seat, he hastily formed a knot, hoping against hope that it might hold fast during what was to follow.

Then, gathering his powers, clearing his eyes of smoke and ashes, Grip-sack Sid prepared for the leap which might mean death to them all, but which might also mean escape from an awful doom.

The footboard against which he was braced was but little above the backs of the wheel-horses, and a leap to that level, taken by itself, would not be so difficult a feat for a cool, steady-nerved man; but if the sudden shock, added to his substantial weight, should break the chosen animal down? A trip or stumble would almost surely produce a wreck or an upset.

"I might play cat enough to get off, but how about those inside? How about the girl? 'Twould prove a hearse, sure enough!"

With those thoughts flashing through his brain, Sid made his leap for life, aiming to strike the pole with his feet, but at the same time stretching out his arms and stiffening his sinews to bear the shock, in case he should miss his aim.

One foot struck the smooth pole, but slipped off it without doing much to break the shock. His arms struck across the backs of the wheel-horses, causing them to crouch and then plunge madly; but Harper knew that to fail now meant a horrible death beneath those whirling wheels, and he fought for life as only a strong man can fight.

Little by little he drew himself upward, then doubled a leg across the stout tongue. After that the rest was comparatively easy, and before the horses had fairly recovered from that heavy shock, he was astride the nigh wheeler, winding the lines about his wrists and rapidly but steadily putting on the check.

"Steady, lads!" still counterfeiting the voice of Topsy Todd, and handling the ribbons with a skill which even that veteran driver would not have despised, tenderfoot that he had considered the man with the grip. "So-ho, lads! Come down, my dandies! Steady—steady, so-ho!"

By not trying to accomplish too much at once, Grip-sack Sid displayed his rare judgment. Little by little the frightened animals began to acknowledge a master-hand, though he was helped considerably by the fact that the long slope had ended a few rods back, and the burning trees no longer overhung the trail.

He had brought the team down to a trot, when the window was lowered and the head of Billy Carter appeared, his face full of fear as he shouted forth something—just what, Harper failed to catch.

"Steady, back there!" he sent over one shoulder, not daring risk a longer glance. "It's all right—don't kick the pudding over, now it's almost baked! Steady, boys! learn to peddle!"

He felt that one peril had been averted, but

he knew that still others might be lying close ahead. This was his first trip over the road, and of course he was ignorant of the route, beyond what little he had gathered from the lips of Tippy, shortly before that unlucky accident took place.

Six miles of more or less dense timber, the driver had said—and that mad flight had cleared little more than one of those miles!

"It's a bigger contract than I care to handle, if I can get any one to take the job off my hands," he grimly muttered, leaning back on the reins, adding his own weight to the strain. "Steady, boys! Time to take a breath, all hands!"

He brought the frightened team down, though it proved no easy job. While no trees were growing very close to the road, there were bushes and scrubby pines, through which the fierce flames were eating their way, and an eddy of wind brought a flood of heated smoke down to the roadway, causing even Harper to choke and cough.

Still, he did bring the team to a halt, and knowing that it would be madness to press on blindly, he alighted, keeping the reins tight while backing toward the side of the coach, calling out as he did so:

"I reckon you'd better get out for a— Steady, boys!" his voice lifting sharply as the horses began to rear and show signs of renewed terror, the swirling smoke almost hiding them from view.

The door swung open, and Billy Carter protruded his head, just as Harper hastily added:

"The lady first—back, you curl!" giving the gambler an angry shove. "Time enough; the lady first!"

"Here—save her—never mind the rest!" panted Anthony Porter, thrusting Enid through the opening, half-wild with fear for his only child.

Even then, all might have gone well, had not the maiden tripped over the feet of the struggling gambler, causing her to pitch forward, headlong. Sid tried to catch her in his arms, and succeeded in partly breaking her fall, but his own balance was destroyed by a wild plunge of the terror-stricken horses, and the reins were jerked from his benumbed fingers as he fell, together with Enid Porter.

He saw the stage plunge forward with a lurch—saw the door slam shut with a force that must have jammed its locks beyond the power of those within to immediately open—then his head came in contact with a rock, filling his eyes with a dizzy blur.

As quickly as possible Grip-sack Sid staggered to his feet, letting Enid lay as she fell for the moment. He dashed a hand across his eyes to clear his vision, staggering down the road, hoping against hope that even yet he might be in time to—

His confused thoughts stopped short, and a gasp of horror rose in his throat.

The team, driven to madness by fright, lacking the hand of new or old master to hold them in check, plunged away at top speed, fairly blind as they dashed onward to destruction.

And Grip-sack Sid was just in time to catch a glimpse of the stage as it toppled over, seeming to turn a complete revolution while in the air, then vanishing amid a cloud of smoke. And he could hear that awful crash as the vehicle struck the rocks, far below the road-bed!

Staggering like a blind man, blood trickling into his eyes from a gash cut by the rock, almost blinded by that shock, mental as well as physical, Sid Harper pressed along the road, acting on the instinct which all men feel when their fellows are in deadly peril.

But his way was barred, before he covered half the distance which lay between the spot where he had fallen, and where the stage had been overturned. A burning tree fell across the road, so close in front of the man with the grip, that the outer branches hurled him backward.

Curiously enough, that fall seemed to revive Harper, for he looked and acted far more naturally as he sprang to his feet, clearing his eyes and backing away from that fierce burst of flame. He could see now, what had escaped his notice before, thanks to the dense smoke; that the fire bordered that stretch of road so closely that no person on foot could hope to pass through with life.

"The girl—she mustn't know!" flashed across his brain, and turning, Grip-sack Sid ran back to where Enid Porter was still lying among the rocks at the side of the road.

He paused long enough to make sure she had received no great injury. Her head had come in contact with a rock, depriving her of her senses, but his trained touch convinced him that no bones were broken.

The smoke and heat were growing unbearable, just there, and in hopes of bettering their condition, Grip-sack Sid lifted Enid in his arms, hurrying back along the trail, looking for an opening through which he might gain a point sufficiently elevated to at least give them a fair chance to breathe, while laying their further course.

He left the road as quickly as seemed prudent, and was clambering among the rocks, when the maiden began to struggle in his arms.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN ON HIS HANDS.

GRIP-SACK SID cast a swift glance around, then hurried on toward a pile of rocks which seemed to offer a still safer resting place, paying no heed to those feeble struggles, for he saw that Enid was still far from conscious. Indeed, her movements ceased shortly after, and when the desired haven was gained, she lay in his arms like one dead.

Gently lowering her to a flat rock, where she could have the benefit of what little clear air there was in motion, Grip-sack Sid opened the sachel which still hung at his hip, bringing forth the brandy flask with which he had tested Tippy Todd an hour or so before.

He poured a few drops between those parted lips, then bathed her temples with the potent liquid, as well as causing her to inhale the pungent odor, all combining to produce the desired effect in a very few moments.

"Papa—oh, dear father!" were the maiden's first words, but Grip-sack Sid did not wait for anything more coherent, soothingly saying:

"Your father's all right, Miss Porter, and so will you be in a few moments more. You got a little fall and bump, you remember, but—"

"Where—father!" cried Enid, shrinking away from her rescuer, whose grimy face, marked with still fresh blood, was hardly calculated to inspire trust in one as yet dazed with terror.

Under ordinary circumstances no man despised a liar more than did Sid Harper, but he was too thoroughly a man of the world not to know that, at times, a few lies well stuck to, are better by far than an ocean of disagreeable truths. So he never hesitated in this emergency, but lied away with hearty good will.

"He's coming—he'll be here by the time you can rally, Miss Porter. Take a wee swallow—you must!" with a trifle of sharpness in his tones as he held the flask to her lips. "You're faint from your fall. Would you shock your father by letting him think you badly hurt, even for a moment? So! that's good, my dear lady!"

That touch of sternness came in the right time. Enid meekly yielded to force, and bravely swallowed the fiery liquor, even trying nobly to keep from coughing after the dose!

"I don't see—where is papa?" she faltered, lifting herself to cast a bewildered glance around, shrinking back with a little shiver as she caught sight of those crackling, roaring flames.

The smoke hides him, just now, Miss Porter," quickly assured Harper, then brushing a sleeve across his face and laughing lightly as he added: "You surely don't think I'd lie to you, my child? Look into my eyes, if you can see through the smut: could I lie to you now?"

"I don't—I hope—but why don't papa come?"

"Your father will come, just as soon as he possibly can, Miss Porter."

"As soon—then he is hurt?"

"Don't think it, child!" calling back that counterfeit sternness for the occasion. "Didn't I tell you he was safe? Would I be facing you like this, if any serious harm had come to him? If you will listen to me while I explain just what happened after you fell from the stage, we'll get at the truth so much the quicker."

"I will try," with a little catch in her voice as she strove to hold her anxiety in check. "But, if you only knew how—he's all I have left, now mother's gone!"

Of all his nerve-tests on that eventful afternoon, Grip-sack Sid found this the hardest. Yet he knew he was acting for her own good, cruel as it may seem, and he met that piteous gaze without flinching. If ever lies are justifiable, his were in that hour of trial.

"And he'd be just as uneasy, if I hadn't contrived to let him know you were safe, Miss Porter. You remember falling from the stage?"

"Papa pushed me—to save—I remember."

"I tried to save you from hitting the rocks, but got a tumble my own self. Not to hurt, though, so don't waste any sympathy on me, my dear child," as he wiped the blood from his face.

"I'd never mention it, only to explain how it was the team managed to get away from me, just then."

"And father?"

"Went with the stage, of course, trying to bring the team to a halt. It did stop—I saw it, as I started in chase. But before I could get there, another burning tree fell across the road, blocking the way. So, of course your father couldn't come to your assistance, but he put you in my care. And, need I say it? I'll do my level best to prove worthy that sacred trust, my dear child!"

There was nothing false in those last words. Anthony Porter had placed Enid in his charge, though involuntarily. And Sid Harper was inwardly vowing to preserve her life, even though in so doing he should be called upon to sacrifice his own.

Enid must have seen something of this in his earnest gaze, for she no longer shrunk away from his side. As a swirl of smoke came swooping down upon them, she even caught hold of his arm.

Yet her thoughts were mainly with her missing parent, and when the smoke began to drift away, she returned to that subject:

"You saw him after—after the tree fell?"

"I saw the stage stop, just as I told you, child," answered Sid, shading his eyes with a curved palm as he tried to pierce that curtain of smoke and flame. "But we can't join the others, just now. The fire has grown worse—let me help you up on this rock," suiting the action to his words. "You can see for yourself, the road is blocked so completely that even a salamander couldn't slip through alive!"

So Enid saw, yet she heaved a sigh as she vainly looked for even a distant glimpse of the stage. Yet—surely it *must* be well! Surely he could not face her so calmly, yet be lying?

"Oh, take me to him! take me to papa!" she cried, chokingly, at the same time springing from the rock and hastening in the direction of the road.

The Grip-sack Sharp flung out a hand to arrest her, but he contented himself with keeping close enough to save her from a fall should her feet slip or trip. And never a word passed his lips until Enid, with a cry of terror and despair, halted of her own accord, where she could look along that stretch of road, now little better than an avenue of flames.

"The stage stopped beyond all that—further than you can see, just now, Miss Porter. That is the only way you can take to rejoin your father, just now. Shall we try to follow after him?"

Enid shuddered, averting her face, closing her eyes, reaching out a hand blindly as she panted:

"It would be suicidal! I will not ask again. Forgive—and guide me, for father's sake, I beg of you!"

"I'll do my level best," said Harper, taking one hand and supporting her with arm about her waist. "I'm old enough to be your father, child. I have a little girl of my own, back home with her mother. And, if I fail you this day, may my own little girl lack a helping hand in her time of need. All I ask is that you *will* trust me."

"I will—I must!"

"Because, without trust, a hard enough task will be made still harder, if not impossible."

"Then there is danger—serious danger?"

"None so serious but what I'll get there," pressing on through the rocks, making for clearer ground where he hoped to be able to discover a refuge where they might reasonably hope to live through that fiery ordeal. "Do you know, that's one of my pet names: the 'Get-there Sharp!' I'll call on you, say to-morrow, for a testimonial to the effect that I'm not wrongfully named, too!"

Enid made no reply to this light speech. The smoke was constantly creeping hither and yon, at times nearly suffocating them. The heat was steadily increasing, and the bare rocks soon began to scorch through their foot-wear. And this told Harper that no more time must be lost in finding a refuge, unless he wished to perish, together with the frail girl whom he had vowed to save.

If he only knew the lay of the ground! If he had even a partial acquaintance with the mountain secrets!

Still, he always did his level best, and when he regained the rocks where he had revived Enid Porter, he climbed to the highest one and gazed intently around, looking for a refuge, though of what sort he had no definite idea.

As a gust of hot air parted the smoke, he caught sight of a dark spot showing against a mass of rocks rising high into the air, and a ray of hope leaped into his heart as he believed that spot marked a cave, or hollow of some sort. Might it not be deep enough to afford them the need protection?

"It's worth trying, anyway!" was his decision, even while taking note of the blazing timber which crowned those white rocks.

He hesitated for an instant after leaping from the rock. Ought he to leave Enid, even for the few moments it would take him to reach that spot? And yet, the heat cast downward by those blazing trees must be intense! Could she endure the ordeal? And if that frail chance should fail them: if the spot should prove nothing more than a blotch of color—no cave or shelter? Would she be able to retreat?

"What is it, sir?" timidly ventured Enid, after waiting a few moments for him to explain that ejaculation. "Nothing worse, I trust?"

"But much better, I'm hoping," was his quick response. "I'm not quite sure enough to take you with me to investigate. The heat must be much worse, over yonder, and you're not strong enough to—"

"I am strong—stronger far than I look," was her brave interposition. "If you must go, I would much rather go too. I'm not a coward, but I'm afraid—I'd be afraid to stay here all alone!"

"I'll be back in a single minute," Harper said, resolutely putting back the hands she reached out toward him. "I dare not take you over there, on an uncertainty. Stay here; for your life, don't move a step away! And answer, loud, if you hear me call. You will mind?"

"If you say I must—yes," bowing her head, meekly.

"It's for your own sake, remember!" cried

Harper, then plunging into the thickening smoke, heading direct for that pile of white rocks.

The heat was even greater than he had calculated, when once he was fully exposed. It seemed to pour down over those rocks in a very flood, drying the sweat on his face and bringing forth a scent of charring wool from his garments. But he was called the "Get-there Sharp," and right nobly did he sustain his right to the title.

Covering his face with his arms, only exposing his eyes sufficiently to keep a straight course, Grip-sack Sid dashed along, over or between the rocks, dodging the falling brands and avoiding the few bushes which were smoking and on the point of bursting into flame.

He reached the base of the rocks, but had no time to inspect them, further than the mouth of that—was it anything more than a mere crevice? Was it a cave, or only a shallow hole, still hotter than outside?

He plunged into the hole, and let out his pent-up breath with a glad gasp as something like a delicious cool wave struck against his scorched face. He paused for no more, but, turning his back on what seemed like heaven by comparison, he plunged back into that heated furnace, bent on saving the maiden so strangely flung upon his hands.

The smoke blinded him, but a shrill yell brought forth a guiding cry, and, a minute later, Grip-sack Sid was beside Enid Porter, tearing off his coat even while hastily explaining what he hoped he had found.

"I didn't have time to explore it, but I believe it'll save us."

Before Enid could fully comprehend his intention, Harper wrapped his coat snugly about her head and shoulders, then gripped one of her gloved hands, clasping her waist with his other arm, hurrying her away toward that haven of refuge.

"It's for life!" he cried, as he felt the full force of the heat, already greatly increased. "For Heaven's sake, don't fall!"

To keep from straying, as well as stumbling, he had to leave his own face exposed, though each moment was one of torture. And when Enid did trip, he could only snatch her up in his arms and press on while breath lasted. Then—with a choking groan, he fell prostrate!

CHAPTER V.

HOW SATAN TRAPPED BILLY CARTER.

BOTH Anthony Porter and Billy Carter were nearly beside themselves with fear, when Grip-sack Sid checked that crazy flight through fire and smoke; but there was a vast difference between their emotions, after all.

Carter had thoughts only for himself, and if his own life could have been saved by sacrificing those of his present companions, he would not have hesitated for a single second.

Although the runaway had not lasted long, those few minutes of sickening plunges and lurches down that rough slope and through the fiery gantlet, had been frightful beyond description.

With thoughts only for his daughter, Anthony Porter, shielding Enid in his arms as best he could, tried to make sure of her safety when, at last, that mad flight was checked and the door could be opened without almost certain destruction following the action.

What followed was partly owing to his anxiety on the girl's account, together with the vicious terror which had taken full possession of Billy Carter.

Thrust back by that strong arm, the gambler fell between the seats, blindly groping for the other door-catch while kicking desperately in an attempt to recover his footing.

This caused Enid to trip and plunge out of the stage headlong, and the same frightened bound of the horses which tore the broken lines from Harper's fingers, made the stage lurch heavily, slamming the door shut and seriously jamming the catch.

Anthony Porter was the first to recover and attempt to open the door, hoping to leap forth before their speed increased so greatly that such an attempt would be suicidal. The heavy lurch brought Billy Carter into violent contact with the elder gentleman, confusing them both, and unfortunately confining their efforts to the one door.

Even without that untimely accident to the door itself, precious moments would have been lost through one pair of hands counteracting the work of the other. Yet, perhaps it was just as well.

The terror-blinded horses were tearing furiously along an avenue of flames, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, driven straight ahead by the strange impulse which defies analysis: which compels them to run on until death or a crash comes to break the spell.

Each passing moment added to their mad pace, for now the level was passed and the heavy stage was running without hardly an effort, at times actually crowding upon the haunches of the plunging wheelers.

Then, just as Sidney Harper staggered to his feet and recovered the use of his eyes sufficiently to take note, a sharp bend in the road was

reached, and in their blindness the lead span made no effort to swing with the narrow trail. Into the loose rocks they plunged, and as the front wheels struck a boulder, the stage jumped clear of the road, seeming to turn completely over in the air, flung outward and downward, falling upon the rocks with an ominous crash.

That first shock shattered a front wheel and snapped the tongue. The stout harness gave way as though suddenly rotting, and with one exception the horses fell clear of the stage.

That same shock tore Topsy Todd from his coat, hurling the still senseless driver far away through the air, to strike in the midst of a clump of scrubby bushes which had as yet escaped the flames.

Over and over rolled the stage after that first flight through the air, ending with a drop of nearly a score feet, forming the base of that steep slope.

Not a sound had come from its interior after that first stunning shock when the road was left. Not a sound came now that the vehicle, broken and splintered, yet in a measure retaining its original shape, lay on one side, its broken wheels still slowly revolving.

Yet a wild, blood-curdling shriek of agony rung through Little Creek Gulch; the cry of the one animal whose voice can surpass in horror that of a tortured human.

One of the wheel-horses—its mate lying a mangled mass high up among the rocks—plunged furiously as it strove to rise, but in vain. Both forelegs were shattered, and after that one terrible cry, the poor brute lay groaning in agony.

For a number of minutes thus, its wild eyes turned up the Gulch in the direction taken by its more fortunate mates, the lead span. Then the poor creature turned its head toward the coach, uttering a low, broken whimper.

Something was stirring inside!

Dazed, bewildered, hardly knowing what he was doing or that he was still in the land of the living, Billy Carter thrust his head through the broken door on the side of the coach that lay uppermost, supported by his hands as he stared vacantly, almost blindly around.

His face was slightly marked with blood, and his pet mustaches had lost their careful curl, but apart from the natural confusion which ought to attend such a thorough shaking-up the gambler did not seem very much the worse for his involuntary flight through the air and over the rocks.

He gasped, caught his breath spasmodically once or twice. He gave a start and shrunk away a bit as the crippled horse gave a groaning whimper. But as he caught sight of the creature lying near by, with recognition came something of his natural energy.

Carter dragged himself through the opening, staggering dizzily as his feet struck the ground. He brought up against the face of the canyon wall, there almost perpendicular, and sinking to a sitting posture, he clasped his head with both hands, trying to clear his brain.

Little by little it all came back to him, and as he began to realize how nearly miraculous had been his escape from an awful death, Billy Carter almost broke his record by breathing a prayer of thanksgiving; almost, but not quite!

Hardly daring to make the attempt, Billy Carter felt at his limbs, then cautiously moved them, one after another, giving vent to husky grunts and ejaculations as he found them sound, not a bone broken, not a serious injury for all that terrible tumbling!

He rose to his feet and stared around, flinching a little as his gaze met flames and smoke on both sides of the canyon. Was all the world afire? Had all humanity perished save himself alone?

That thought brought to mind Anthony Porter, in whose continued existence he had a certain interest, trebled now that he felt in such sore need of a mate to help him cheat those roaring flames. He started toward the shattered coach, but as his aching eyes caught sight of the gleam of flowing water near the other side of the gulch, all else was forgotten until his burning thirst was assuaged.

Lying flat on his stomach Billy Carter drank long and deeply, and though he was hardly a fast friend to cold water, never before had he tasted a more delicious draught than that.

It revived his strength and cleared his brain, turned topsy-turvy as that had been by his ride and his tumble over the rocks. It gave him manhood enough to think of others besides himself, and when a long look up the rocks, where the fire was still raging, told him he could do naught to assist the couple left behind in that furnace, he made haste to see what could be done for Anthony Porter.

The stage lay with its top toward the little stream, and through a wide rent in this, Billy Carter caught sight of a human face, white and ghastly, its owner seemingly beyond all human help.

He reached in through the opening, gripping Anthony Porter by the shoulders, then slowly and with difficulty dragged him clear of the ruins. Then—he rose erect, flashing a swift

glance around, as if he feared being surprised by some one.

No living person was visible. Nothing but the groaning horse, and though it had eyes, it could not talk!

His eyes came back, resting on the bosom of Anthony Porter as he lay on the broad of his back, his garments rent, a streak of blood marking his high forehead, a—plump wallet showing one end of itself just above where the silk vest joined over the shirt-bosom!

It was so temptingly plump! It seemed to sing of crisp bank-notes! It almost begged the owner of those eyes to draw it forth and—

Once more Billy Carter cast a keen glance around, then dropped to his knees beside the motionless figure. One hand drew a kerchief from his own bosom, using a corner to wipe away that streak of blood. The silk fell from his slender fingers—the fingers of a gambler or of a pickpocket! The wallet was hidden beneath its folds. And when Billy Carter lifted his own property, the wallet had vanished!

"I say, my dear sir!" he called out, starting a bit at the sound of his own voice, but quickly rallying. "Porter! If you're dead, why don't you say so?"

There was no answer. Even the echo of his own voice was drowned by the sound of flames, the groaning of the tortured horse.

Billy Carter drew back still further, edging around the stage until that motionless shape was lost to his sight. Then, turning his back to the coach, he deftly opened the fat wallet, far enough to catch a glimpse of a thick layer of bank-notes, the top one being of goodly denomination.

"He ought to lose it, for being so cursed careless!" the gambler muttered, softly, his brows contracting as he flashed a glance over one shoulder. "He would have lost it—only for me! It was loose. It was slipping out. It would have fallen at his first move. Then—the fire would have made an end of it all!"

His trained fingers ruffled over the bills at one end, and a red glow of avarice shot into his eyes as he mentally summed up the whole.

His keen eyes crept into each pocket, and lighting on a narrow strip of paper, or cardboard, he deftly extracted it to see—a section of a photograph, showing on its face the feet and a bit of the legs of a man. On the back, in bold yet peculiar writing, was the name of a hotel in Rocky Comfort with which Billy Carter was familiar: "The Sweet Home," kept by Owen Potter.

The gambler stared at the bit of card, then gave a sudden start, a low ejaculation escaping his lips.

"What does it mean? Wonder if the—"

He broke off abruptly, swiftly thrusting the pocketbook into his bosom, looking up the canyon as his head bent sideways.

He caught the echo of a horse's neigh, and as he listened intently the sound was repeated. There could be no mistake; the sound came from up the gulch, and there could be but one solution:

"One of the nags must have come over the rocks, alive! If— But what if he isn't dead?"

Billy Carter crept around the end of the stage, gazing almost apprehensively upon that silent figure. Anthony Porter had not moved of his own accord since his senses fled with that terrible crash and tumble. He lay like a corpse. Surely—

"Of course he isn't dead!" huskily muttered Carter, one hand stealing into his bosom where, close beside that wallet, nestled a slender-bladed dagger. "But—he ought to be, by rights!"

Once more Satan was tempting the gambler; and as his hand came forth, it brought a weapon with it. There was murder in those little eyes, and—only for the pitiful groan which came from the crippled horse, just then, murder might have been done.

As it was, Carter shoved back his dagger, turning pale as a corpse himself. In his shaken condition, it seemed to him as though that poor brute would call aloud and put the brand of Cain upon his forehead, should he yield to that devilish temptation!

Another neigh came down the gulch, and without touching the body of Anthony Porter, Billy Carter sprung away in that direction, hoarsely muttering as he fled:

"For help—I can't help him alone!"

And when, a few minutes later, he came to the spot where Topsy Todd's leaders were standing side by side, their trailing lines caught around a rock, thus bringing them to an unwilling pause, he was still lying to his own ears, still declaring that his sole thought was how to bring help as quickly as possible to Anthony Porter. Yet, as he mounted one horse, leading the other, he rode up, not down the gulch!

CHAPTER VI.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

ALTHOUGH Anthony Porter lay without sense or motion, when Billy Carter turned in guilty flight up the gulch, if the gambler had been a little cooler, he might have caught the husky call that was sent after him, just before his figure vanished amid that swirl of heated smoke as it came eddying into the gulch.

"Billy Carter! whar—come back, ye devil!"

That voice belonged to Topsy Todd, whose slowly-returning senses were quickened by torture as the scrubby bushes into which he had been flung caught fire from a dropping brand.

The first tongue of flame licked his ear, crisping his grizzled hair, and with a smothered growl, the driver slapped his face, rolled over, then struggled to a sitting posture. Dazed though he was from the blow his thick skull had received, Topsy knew what fire was when he saw it, and as the flames began to creep toward him, he managed to flounder to his feet and win clear of the scrub.

It was at this instant he caught sight of Carter, running up the gulch, and instinctively called after him. But he had only imperfect control of his vocal organs, as yet, and the shout passed unheard.

And Topsy Todd did not repeat the call, for just then his gaze fell upon the body of his dead wheeler, lying hard by, and with a low groan of pain he staggered toward it.

He had never known the love of family. An only child, he had been left an orphan while yet but an infant. His life had been a lonely and loveless one ever since, only for the strong affection which he ever felt for animals, and horses in particular. Of all he had known and cared for, the team he had driven on this sad day had been best beloved. And now—as he sunk to his knees by the side of that mangled body, hot tears dropped from his eyes and choking sobs rose in his throat.

Only a horse! Only a rough, illiterate driver! Yet many a human being has gone to the grave far less sincerely mourned.

That shock had come when Topsy Todd was at his weakest, but after that first burst of genuine grief, the veteran quickly rallied.

"Whar's the other pets?" he huskily muttered, brushing a ragged, charred sleeve across his face, then staring dazedly around, unheeding the fierce heat that caused even his stout, coarse garments to smoke.

He could see where the stage had broken down the little wall of rocks piled up on the outer edge of the bend, and thus locating the point where the fatal plunge had taken place, he knew where to look for the rest.

"Down yender! Down in Little Crick Gulch!" passed his lips as he turned in that direction after a last, sad look at his dead wheeler.

He had no hopes that any of his horses had escaped with life, for only too well he knew what that crash and fall must have been. As yet he thought only of his team; never once did his mind turn to his late passengers.

As he gained the edge of the gulch wall, he caught his breath with a sharp gasp, for just then the crippled horse lifted his head and gave another groan of pain.

"Dandy—the pick o' the lot."

Hope was mingled with grief, for he saw that life lingered, and with this as an incentive, Topsy Todd quickly lowered himself by the arms hanging for a moment to steady himself, then dropped to the bottom of the gulch.

The shock doubled him up in a heap, but without stopping to ascertain the extent of his own injuries, Todd hastened over to where his pet lay, brokenly whimpering a recognition at its master's approach.

The driver never uttered a word. He could not, now that he saw how terribly his favorite was injured. Both forelegs were broken, bones protruding through the skin. A cure was impossible. Only death could help the poor creature.

Hot tears were washing the smut from that grim face as Topsy Todd sat down, hugging the horse's head to his breast, one hand gently patting that quivering muzzle, the other—

"I'd rather a durn sight 'twas through the head o' me, my own self! I'd rather—but it hed to be did, Dandy—it hed to be did!"

For, while one hand patted and soothed the tortured animal, with his other Topsy Todd sent a bullet through Dandy's brain.

Topsy Todd rose to his feet after gently lowering the head of his dead pet to the ground. He glanced around in quest of his leaders, but could see nothing of either. A faint gleam of hope flickered into his eyes, but was as quickly smothered.

"It'd be too much to hope fer," he muttered, in grim self-reproof. "No boss could come down thar, an' live. Yit—didn't I see Billy Carter runnin' off yen-way?"

He cast a single glance up the gulch, then, remembering his other passengers, he turned toward the broken coach, catching his breath a bit as he saw that motionless figure, lying just clear of the ruins.

"The old gent—whar's the gal?"

His eyes, once more keen and steady, shot through the broken roof, but as he failed to see aught of what he dreaded, Topsy Todd drew nearer, searching both inside and out until satisfied that neither Enid Porter nor Sidney Harper were in the wreck.

"Jest stunded!" he nodded, as he turned again to Porter, noting the quivering eyelids, the slowly heaving chest. "Mebbe he kin tell whar the rest is gone. Anyway, I'm fer tryin'!"

His own hat had been lost, but he caught up that which belonged to Anthony Porter, using it to bring water from the little creek hard by. And under that cool application, it was not long before the old gentleman began to revive.

His first thoughts were of his daughter, of course, and though Todd tried his best to give soothing answers, his very efforts went far toward reviving Porter, through deepening his fears.

"Where is the road?" he huskily demanded, staggering to his feet and gazing bewilderedly around. "This isn't—where's the road?"

"Up yender. But you don't want the road, boss. It's jest a gob o' fire, whar even a ghost couldn't live a single minnit!"

"But my child is up there! I gave her to that man—"

"Not the feller as rid outside 'long o' me, boss?"

"Yes! He stopped the team from running away, and told us—I put my child out, and then—the horses ran away again!"

"Then the young leddy is safe—safe, anyway, as a body kin be whar the bull dog-gun range 'pears to be afire," decisively nodded Todd, checking Porter as he, half-crazed with anxiety for his child, was starting off in search of a point where that rock wall might be scaled.

"You think so? You're not simply trying to quiet my fears? Oh, man, if you have any manhood left in you! help me find and save my poor little girl! Don't let her—help her, I beg of you!"

It was no easy task, but Topsy Todd proved equal to the occasion.

He hardly believed all he swore to, himself, but that did not hinder his argument in the slightest. He felt that he must quiet those fears, or else Anthony Porter would go crazy.

He forced Porter to tell more plainly the events which had taken place after that falling limb deprived him of his senses. And though the inside passenger could but imperfectly picture that mad runaway, past experience supplied the gaps, and Topsy Todd was thoroughly sincere when he swore that Sidney Harper was one man in a thousand!

"An' sence your gal is in his keer, don't you borrow any worry 'long o' her 'count, boss! Ef he axed ye to git out, be sure he'd picked out the safest spot 'long the trail, an' whar he see a better way o' gittin' out o' the fire then by stickin' to the hearse. An' so—I'll bet ye dollars to cents that we'll find 'em all two both waitin' fer us when we make Rocky Comfort! So thar!"

Anthony Porter wanted to believe, and finally he did believe, though his eyes would wander longingly up those rocks, where the smoke and flames were still too dense for perfect hope. Could even a strong, clear-headed man like Sidney Harper preserve a weak woman from all those perils?

"An' you hain't hurt none, to say bad?" asked Topsy Todd, looking over his passenger, noting his torn garments.

"I don't—I never stopped to think," muttered Porter, mechanically passing both hands over his person, then giving a start as one hand paused above his heart.

"Rib gratin'?" ventured Todd, noting that action.

"No, but I've lost—perhaps it fell out in the stage," muttered Porter, turning in that direction, a troubled look in his eyes.

"Wu'th very much? Couldn't 'a' bin a puss, I don't reckon?" slowly persisted the driver, his face wrinkled, his eyes beginning to glitter as he flashed a glance up the gulch.

"Have you seen anything of it, then?" a little sharply demanded Porter, turning that way. "Of course it must have dropped out when you dragged me from the wreck, but—"

"You was drug out afore I come down, boss," nodded Todd, taking out his pistol and filling the chamber he had emptied. "Mebbe you fit the way out your own self afore you knowed it. Or—mebbe Billy Carter lent a hand afore he lit out."

"You mean—what do you mean, anyway?" impatiently demanded the gentleman, after a vain attempt to read that enigmatical face.

"Waal, jest let me state the case, boss, an' you kin do the jedgin fer your own self. Billy Carter was inside 'long o' you when the dump come, wasn't he?"

Anthony Porter nodded assent, then cast a puzzled look around.

"He hain't inside now, nur he hain't layin' 'round loose, nigh 'nough fer ye to spy him, nuther. Now, mind ye, boss, I'm jest statin' facts. Billy's a gambler. Billy's a sport, rankin' somewhar 'bout five or six-rate. Billy was well 'nough to pick up his hoofs right lively, fer I ketched a glimpse o' him running off up gulch, jest afore I come down hyar.

"Now—what made him run off? You was dry as a bone when I come down, though thar's cold water right handy. Billy didn't try to fetch ye 'round. Why didn't he try? Waal, mebbe he was so tuck up with a prize he'd found, that he didn't hev time to think o' sech trifles as savin' a feller human."

"Surely you don't think he would have robbed

a corpse? For, no doubt, he thought the fall had killed me. You can't believe that?"

"Ef I knowed how big a pile you lost, mebbe I could give a better guess," dryly retorted the driver.

"Five or six hundred, but I don't care for that. If only I could do something to help—can't we do anything to help my child?"

"Not while the fire lasts so fierce, we can't. You give the stage a closer s'arch fer your puss. Mebbe it's in thar, after all."

Porter obeyed, though only half-heartedly. As he said, he cared little for the monetary loss, and though he attached a far greater importance to that bit of cardboard, showing the sun-pictured feet of a man on one side, and the names of two men and a hotel on the other, his mind kept running on his missing child and her peril.

"Found any thing, boss?" asked Topsy Todd, coming back from the stream, along the moistened brink of which he had been creeping during that vain search.

"No. The notebook is not here. I must have lost it out while rolling down the rocks."

"Or else it stuck to Billy Carter's fingers when he lit out, up the gulch," chuckled Todd, twitching Porter's sleeve as he added: "Ef you'll come this way a bit, boss, mebbe I kin show ye somethin' wu'th lookin' at."

He pointed to where a number of fresh hoof-prints showed in the damp earth, and was on the point of explaining, when their ears caught the sharp click of iron striking against stone. For a moment they stood listening, then Topsy Todd drew Porter toward the stage, grating:

"Them's my hosses! Billy's ketched 'em up, an' now—stop him as he comes! Stop him, fer yer life!"

And when, a few seconds later, Billy Carter came trotting into view, Topsy Todd sprang from cover with leveled pistol, crying sternly:

"Han's up, Billy Carter, or down goes yer meat-house!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE VALUE OF A LIVELY TONGUE.

SIDNEY HARPER fell heavily against the rocks, spent by that desperate struggle against such heavy odds. The heat was intense, and every breath he had drawn—so much shorter, quicker, thanks to the burden he bore—seemed to peel the skin from his throat and scorch his quivering nostrils.

Enid Porter, saved from much of this by the coat which he had wrapped about her head and shoulders, cleared her face sufficiently to give a sharp cry of alarm as she felt herself falling.

"Father! dear father!"

That was all, but it was enough to spur the Get-There Sharp onward once more, and hardly had he come into contact with those heated rocks, than he staggered back to his feet, lifting the maiden in his arms and staggering with his precious burden in search of the hole below those furiously burning trees.

"Get there! I've got to get there!"

He was hardly conscious of the words, but they fully expressed his unshaken nerve, his dogged grit. He would "get there," or die trying.

The red-tinged smoke was briefly swept aside, and his aching eyes caught sight of the hole. One more desperate struggle, and he gained the refuge, almost pitching headlong into the opening as he was forced to stoop with his burden.

He crawled a few yards on his hands and knees, holding Enid from rude contact with the rough rocks. And then, drinking in long breaths of what seemed ice-cold air, Sid Harper lay beside the motionless maiden for nearly a minute.

The gloom inside that refuge—even now he could not say with certainty it was more than a shallow opening between the rocks, from whence they might be driven by that terrible heat as the flames worked still closer—was partially dispelled by that ruddy glow, and like one in a dizzy dream, Sidney Harper saw the uncovered face of the maiden whom he had already risked so much to save from a cruel death.

Enid lay as she had dropped from his arms, the coat falling away from her head. Once more her senses had fled, though Grip-sack Sid could not remember of her striking those rocks outside with any force. Surely he had guarded against that!

Still, the dizzy doubt did him good, and after a few seconds of delicious rest, during which he taxed the capacity of his lungs to their utmost, so soothing did that comparatively fresh air feel, he threw off his lethargy and called to the young woman.

There was no answer, and then, beginning to fear the worst, he bent over her, mechanically fumbling at his grip-sack the while.

Times without number had he called upon that faithful companion, and this was not one of the few times when it failed him. He brought forth the brandy-flask, and for the second time since fate flung them together, Enid Porter was restored to her senses by that fiery liquor.

A little swallow helped the man, as well, and by the time Enid could sit up unsupported, the Get-There Sharp was almost himself again.

"All's well that ends well, little lady!" he

cried, doubling the cheerfulness which he really felt, for her benefit. "Isn't this just glorious? Almost worth a trip through the fiery furnace, simply to know how good pure air can taste, isn't it?"

"Then—we are really—safe?" faltered Enid, gazing dazedly around, shrinking from the red glow that came in through the low entrance, then recoiling from the gloom lying beyond them.

"Safe! I should remark! It's simply paradise! All that's lacking is a little ice-water, and—what can you offer as a substitute, oh, most noble grip? Surely—I knew it!" with a light laugh as the hand which had been fumbling in his satchel came forth with a couple of lemons. "Finest thing in the world to quench thirst, my child! I'd ask for a tank of ice-water, if the doctors didn't swear it was but another name for rank poison. So—there you have it, ma'am!"

With a turn of his knife, Grip-sack Sid removed an end of the lemon, and handed the acid fruit to Enid. Almost mechanically she took it, shivering a bit as she followed his example; but after the first taste, the juice proved wonderfully refreshing to her parched throat.

"Finest thing in the world!" repeated Harper, even while giving an involuntary grimace as the acid juice entered the cracks in his lips. "Comforts the inner man, beautifies the outer woman! Just make up your mind to that effect, my child, and you'll find it both food and drink. And while you're doing so, what's the matter with me finding out just how far back our apartment extends?"

"Don't—I'm afraid to be alone!" and then, hiding her face in her hands, Enid sobbed hysterically.

Harper moved nearer, gently but firmly removing her hands, forcing her eyes to meet his masterful gaze.

"Is this wise, Miss Porter?" he asked, with a touch of sternness in his tones. "Is this the account you would like me to give to your father when he asks how you bore up?"

"If I only could—oh, please take me to papa!" sobbed the girl, a woman no longer in her great grief and anxiety.

Harper rose to his feet, lifting Enid with him. He led her as near the entrance as the increasing heat would permit, forcing her to look forth despite her involuntary recoil, then saying:

"I brought you through that, Miss Porter, when it was almost as bad. Shall I carry you back again?"

"No! no! 'twould be sure death!"

"Yet I'd have to do it if I obeyed your cry, just uttered. While that fire lasts, we must stay in here. And—don't you think we ought to be thankful for having even so gloomy a shelter as this?"

"I was wrong. Forgive me. I didn't know what I was saying. But—if I could only be sure poor papa was safe!"

"If grieving would make him safer, my child, I'd turn on the tap and show you my eyes as first-class hydrants!" resuming his light, careless manner as he moved back from the entrance where the heat was becoming unbearable. "Of course he is in safety, and his only source of suffering is a doubt whether you are faring as well. And so—grin and bear it isn't a very high-toned maxim, but I couldn't offer you better advice were I to rack my poor brains from now until next week."

Either the heat was rapidly increasing as the rocks overhead absorbed that cast forth by the burning trees, or else that grateful coolness had but seemed such by contrast with the outer air. Either way, Grip-sack Sid deemed it wisest to retreat further from the hole which had given them admittance, and after groping their way through the darkness for a few yards, he gently induced Enid to seat herself, while he once more fumbled at his convenient grip.

"I've had to take many a laugh and jeer because of my sticking to the old alligator," he said, "but, all the same, where I go it goes, and its freight-bill has been paid ten thousand times over! For instance: what would we do for illumination in this den, only for—how's that for elevation, my child?" an echo of triumph in his voice as he brought forth a mask-lantern and set it aglow. "I'm not over-particular, you know, but I do like to know just how to find the back door in case any unwelcome callers should give a rap at the front one. And so—excuse me a moment, please! I'll be back almost before you can wink twice—if you're not too awfully in a hurry about it!"

His absence really lasted only a short while, but it was long enough for him to make sure they were where still further retreat from rising temperature would be easy. He did not find the end of the cave, for he feared to leave Enid too long alone.

She was sitting as he had left her, with head bowed over her arms which were supported by her knees. She stirred at his coming, but did not lift her head, and Harper set the lantern down on a slight elevation in the rocky floor, once more opening his grip, taking from it a small box of tin, the cover of which bore a printed label.

Its contents appeared to be some sort of salve, and he used the tip of a finger to anoint his scorched face.

Both his face and his hands had suffered while bearing Enid to that refuge, but having strong faith in the salve whose virtues his glib tongue had so often sung through many a wild, lawless mining-camp, Harper diligently rubbed it in, never heeding his smarting skin, but uttering a low whistle as if to try his lips again.

"Don't—I can't bear it!" abruptly sobbed Enid, lifting her head and looking that way. "How can you whistle—how can you seem so gay and thoughtless when—oh, my poor father! Come to me! Come to your little girl, before she dies of grief!"

"But beg, borrow or steal a complete suit of asbestos before you make the venture, my dear sir!" laughed he of the grip, still firm in his belief that yielding to sentiment was the worst thing that could happen them, just then.

"Come, Miss Porter, you don't really mean it? You surely wouldn't have your father run the risk of his life in trying to rejoin you here, when by waiting in patience a few hours, at the very most, all must be well?"

"If I could only be as sure as you seem!"

"What's to hinder? Is my face so much against my nature that you can't help believing me a liar? If so, it's because the heat has twisted it all out of shape! And that—you saw what I was doing, just now! Using Dewey's Magic Salve. The finest thing out for cuts, bruises, burns or scalds! One application cures a moderate case, while a dozen would bring a dead man back to life, and two boxes would restore his balmy youth! For a fact, or I wouldn't begin to say so, ma'am!"

"And you think—tell me the plain truth, I beg of you!" said Enid, moving a little closer, gazing into his face with appealing eyes. "You are sure my father escaped all harm?"

"I say only the truth when I declare to you that I believe your father is much further from pain or harm than either you or I, Miss Porter," answered Harper, his tone and manner undergoing an abrupt change.

"And we will soon rejoin him?"

"In Heaven's good time—yes," with a grave smile that served to soothe her fears even more than words.

It looks cruel, in print, but what else could he do? If he told her what he really believed: that Anthony Porter was dead, that the meeting he prophesied could only take place on the other side of the grave; her sorely tried strength would surely have given way completely, and with it her reason might take flight.

Once more his hand slipped into that all-containing grip, and this time it brought forth from a secret recess, a small case, covered with dark plush. Under his thumb a spring yielded and the case flew open. He lifted the lantern until its light fell upon the delicately painted face of a woman and two children, evidently twins.

"I told you I had a little daughter of my own, Miss Porter," he said, his voice sounding deep and tender as his eyes, with hers, rested upon that pretty group. "This is my girl, this my boy, and that their mother, my wife."

Enid murmured something, she hardly knew what. The faces were interesting, or would have been so only for those terrible fears which still rent her own heart.

"They are as dear to my heart, each and all, as your father is dear to you, Miss Porter. If I knew I could never again meet them, I would grieve fully as deeply as you are grieving now. If I even doubted my ever getting back to them, could I whistle as I whistled a bit ago? To think that, would be to class me lower than the brutes!"

"I didn't—please forget!"

"I have forgotten, even as I want you to forget, my child," Harper said, as he closed the case and returned it to its former hiding-place. "All I wanted was to show you how surely I count on escaping from this pickle. And, of course, my escape includes your own. If you were not so shaken in nerve, I wouldn't waste good breath in adding that, for it follows—"

If that sentence was ever completed, even his own ears failed to catch the words, for a deafening crash burst upon them.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO IS ESAU JACOBS?

THE very rocks above and about them seemed about to crush and fall to fragments before that heavy shock, and Grip-sack Sid instinctively sprang up and bowed his sturdy frame above the maiden, his first and most natural thought being for her safety.

The very floor beneath them shook and trembled, while the air all around eddied in waves, growing thick with smoke and powdered rock.

This shock lasted only for a second or two, and as nothing worse than a few bits of stone, shaken from the irregular roof above, fell upon that bowed frame, the Get-there Sharp quickly rallied, calling out:

"It's nothing—nothing serious, little lady! Nothing worse than a tree or two falling, cut down by the fire!"

Enid gave a gasping breath of partial relief, though he could feel her shivering like a leaf as his hands touched her bent head.

"Will you let me go see just what has happened?" he asked, giving that head a reassuring touch. "You will not be afraid to stay here alone for a few moments?"

"Let me go with you—please?" pleaded the girl, making as if to regain her feet.

"No. I'd rather you waited here. You haven't forgotten how hot we found it by the entrance, a bit ago. 'Twill be even worse now. One consolation, though," with another reassuring laugh which could hardly have come from his heart. "Now the trees have fallen, the fire will spend itself all the sooner."

Enid released the hand she had caught, and her doing so gave Harper no little encouragement. It told him she was surely if slowly regaining something of her natural courage, and with all that might lie before them before safety was won, that meant much.

"I'll leave you the lantern, and almost before you can tell what color its light is, I'll be back here with good news!"

So his lips said, as he moved away toward the hole through which they had entered the cave, but far different thoughts were in his busy brain. That severe shock must mean more than the mere falling of a tree or two.

And so it proved, on investigation. The entrance was blocked by great stones which had yielded to that shock, aided no doubt by the intense heat to which they had been subjected for so long—blocked so completely that his eager gaze could find but a single narrow crevice, and that would have been invisible but for the ruddy flames shooting up without that barricade.

The heat was intense, and the acrid smoke seemed increasing. He could not make a close examination, and feared to linger long lest Enid should come to see what was detaining him. At all hazards he must keep this new calamity from her, at least until she had grown calmer.

"More lies, old man!" he muttered, grimly, as he turned his back on the blocked entrance and moved off to rejoin his charge. "All right! You know how to turn your tongue to it, when necessity compels!"

The distance was short, and he was soon before Enid, smiling into her anxious face as she turned the rays of the lantern squarely upon him.

"It's just as I said, Miss Porter: A tree or two tumbled down, and the fragments are blazing up in fine shape! So much the better, since we can't very well get out until they lose an inch or two of their heat. Yet—"

"Then there was harm done?" interposed Enid, catching at that barely perceptible hesitation for the right word.

"Not a bit more than common prudence can get over," was the reassuring reply. "Of course 'twas too pesky hot for me to go clear outside, but I'm thinking there are other trees to take a tumble in their turn. And so, to be on the safest side, suppose we move yet a little further back? Don't you find the air is getting slightly oppressive, right here?"

"You think it will grow worse, then?" rising to her feet.

"For a time, only," as he took the lantern from her hand and led her still further from the front of the cavern. "But the faster the fire burns, the sooner 'twill turn to ashes. Don't forget that cheerful fact, please!"

His former short exploration told him of a crook in the cave, or irregular tunnel as it might almost be called, and he paused only when they had passed this bend. It was one more safeguard against Enid's making that ugly discovery, yonder.

Selecting a fairly comfortable spot, Harper folded his coat into a cushion and forced Enid to occupy it. He even hinted that it would be a rare stroke of wisdom on her part could she compose herself for a little nap, but that idea was promptly negated.

"I could not sleep, for thinking of—I shall never sleep again until I have joined papa," Enid declared, bravely choking back a longing sob as that loved title passed her lips.

Sid had hoped to carry this point, which would leave him free to more carefully examine the blocked entrance, but, fearing to rouse fresh suspicions by insisting, he fell to work to complete the cure he had so well begun.

He had a glib tongue when occasion demanded, and just now he gave it full play, talking of his home, his wife and children, his business—that of traveling agent—which called him from home for months at a stretch. But that only made his home-coming all the more delightful, and already he could see a prospect of a different life, when he would have to roam no more.

Then, adroitly making the shift, he endeavored to learn what strange chance had brought a young lady so far from what is called civilization, yet shaping his questions so adroitly that no offense could possibly be taken.

And Enid seemed only too glad of the chance offered. Anything was better than silence, where her thoughts would persist in conjuring

up all imaginable evils to her missing father. And so, with an occasional deft question, Grip-sack Sid learned what may be greatly condensed for present purposes.

It was a strange story, and ran back a long ways: even before her birth, since she briefly alluded to a quarrel between brothers which took place when both were young and hot-blooded. She did not bring out the cause of that quarrel: possibly she was ignorant of the whole truth herself: she only said that such a quarrel took place, after which Lionel, younger brother to Anthony Porter, went away and was lost sight of for many years.

She could not be sure that he had ever been heard of, in truth, though of late years each recurring birthday in their family—now reduced to herself and father—had brought tasty and costly gifts from an uncertain source. To each gift was appended the name "ESAU JACOBS." Nothing more than that. And though the gifts generally came by Express, all identifying marks were obliterated before delivery.

"That was all, until last month," added Enid, herself deeply interested in the curious recital, no less than was Grip-sack Sid. "Then two letters came, one to father, the other to me. Those letters were signed with the same name over which we had spent so many wondering moments, and which had brought many a grave, sad look into papa's eyes of late years: Esau Jacobs."

"There was neither date nor signature to either letter, but the contents were alike: word for word, he wrote to me what he had written to father. And each note—they were too short to be really letters, you know!—each note asked us to come to Rocky Comfort by a certain date, if we really wished to know who Esau Jacobs was, in life. That if we failed to accept this invitation, we would never be any the wiser, for when that day passed, without our appearance, he whom we had known as Esau Jacobs would never more appear, even in writing."

"Besides these few lines, written in the strong, peculiar hand which had signed the name attached to those mysterious gifts, each note contained a portion of a photograph, like this!"

As she spoke, Enid brought forth a small notebook, from which she drew a slip of cardboard, precisely similar to that which Billy Carter had found in the stolen wallet, with one exception. Where that showed a man's feet and ankles, this slip clearly came next when the card had been whole, since it showed a pair of knees, with a few inches of the legs, above and below.

Turning the slip, Harper bent closer to the lantern, to read the words written on the white reverse. He saw two names: Esau Jacobs and Owen Potter, the last being given as the proprietor of a hotel called "Sweet Home," in Rocky Comfort.

"And your father had a counterpart of this?" he asked, strong curiosity visible in both face and tones.

"Save that it had been the bottom of the card, showing the feet."

"And there was no reason given why this was sent you?"

"No reason, exactly," slightly hesitating, but then adding: "He said we were to stop at that hotel, and have those cards or slips in readiness when called for. He said the man who could complete that mutilated photograph, would be Esau Jacobs, since his head and face would be the head and face pictured on the joined card."

"And your father concluded to keep such a strange appointment?"

"Yes. He told me then, what he had partly let drop before, that he had come to believe the unknown being who sent us such nice presents on our birthdays, must surely be his long missing brother, my uncle, Lionel Porter!"

"It may be—and yet—it's a queer way to bring about a reunion!" muttered Harper, closely studying that strip of cardboard. "If one can judge the body by what is shown of his legs on this, the card must have been unevenly cut, or else there were two or three other slips. Yet—you have no near relatives?"

"Only a cousin, Helen Brandow, and her husband."

"Did Esau Jacobs send them gifts, as well as to you two?"

"I don't know for sure, but I am inclined to think Helen received some, if not as many. We—well, we were not very good friends, and for a number of years past she has been living in Chicago, we in New York."

"Well, I'm rather glad I'm bound for Rocky Comfort, as well," said Harper, forcing a little laugh as he gave back the card. "I've heard just enough about this Esau Jacobs to want to learn more. May I look at the gentleman, if I'm very meek and cautious about it?"

Enid laughed, which was just what he wanted most, at that time. He felt that this long talk had done her good, by keeping her thoughts apart from their peril and from her missing father. He knew that she was not liable to break down again, so long as he could make her feel that their escape and joining Anthony Porter was merely a question of time.

With gentle force he insisted on her lying down on his coat, to rest, even if sleep was out

of the question. And when, with an admirably counterfeited yawn, he protested his own sleepiness, Enid yielded so far as to lie down, the grip-sack beneath her head as a pillow.

For some little time Harper lay curled up just at the edge of the little circle of light cast forth by the lantern, his eyes closed, but keeping covert watch over Enid through his lashes, crisped and shortened by the heat he had fought through in reaching the cave. Then his breathing deepened, until it almost became a snore, lasting until he felt reasonably confident that Enid was actually sleeping.

When this conviction was reached, the Get-There Sharp silently slid away into the gloom, creeping slowly until he felt it safe to rise erect. Then, forgetting all else in his impatient longing to know the very worst, he hastened through the darkness to where those displaced stones blocked up their means of regaining the outer world.

The fallen trees were still ablaze, and the rocks were hot to his touch, so that he could not make anything like a thorough examination, even had time been granted him; which it was not!

He turned with a cry of angry surprise as a bright light flashed past him, to behold Enid Porter, staring bewilderedly at the rocks.

"It was here—it is—not barred, surely?" she gasped.

"I tried to keep it from you, but—it is barred, my poor child!"

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY CARTER'S TRIBULATIONS.

"Don't shoot—for love o'—"

"Flopp up yer flippers, or down ye come in a heap!"

Billy Carter, taken completely by surprise, had wrenched up his mount the instant that armed figure sprung into view from behind the wrecked stage, but it is doubtful if he at once recognized the speaker, or saw more than that ugly muzzle covering his breast.

But at that second stern challenge, something of that fright left his red face, and he ejaculated:

"It's you, Topsy? Why, I began to think—"

"Will you elewate, Billy Carter?"

The veteran driver was taking no long chances, just then. He knew his man tolerably well. He knew that, bit of a cur though he was when caught in a tight pinch, the red-mustached gambler had few equals in a game of swift-draw and snap-shooting.

Smoke blurred his eyesight, but he could see those long-fingered hands, and with his revolver covering the breast of the gambler, he fully intended to drop the pointed hammer at their first movement toward a weapon.

There was little room for argument with such a fellow, and Carter threw up his hands with a jerk, trying to force a grin, though with no great success.

"Up they go, Topsy, since you make such a point of it."

"'Nother p'int is to see how pritty you kin keep 'em thar, too," grimly grunted the driver, stepping a little further from the stage, behind which he had sought concealment at the sound of approaching hoofs.

"It's the sort of pay I get for catching and bringing back your runaways, Todd? If I'd only known as much before—"

"Tumble off o' that critter. Never mind about huntin' a grip with them ten fingers o' yours. Jest let go all holts an' tumble!"

Enforced as these words were with a six-shooter, whose caliber began to look like that of a cannon in his frightened gaze, Carter did not even attempt to argue the case, but "tumbled" accordingly. He came down on his feet, cat-like, but even then he kept his hands high above his head, flinching from yet seeing naught but that armed hand.

With his left hand Topsy Todd gave each of those whimpering muzzles a caress, and then he felt safe on that score; while he remained in sight, nothing short of brute strength could force either of those faithful animals from that spot.

Having won this point, the driver felt more at ease, and as Carter gave another deprecatory whine, just then, he changed his tactics to suit. Craning his neck, giving his smoky face a hasty scrape with the back of his free hand, he partly lowered his pistol, though still keeping it ready for swift use in case of need.

"Waal, crack my snapper ef I don't—who be ye, critter?"

"What you called me—Billy Carter. And after all I've done for you, Topsy—catching and bringing back your nags—don't this look like you're playing me a mighty heap o' dirt?"

"Waal, ef I've done ary thing I ought to be sorry fer, I'm mighty glad of it!" boisterously declared the driver, seemingly forgetful of the dead in the presence of the living. "Fer I'd 'bout give up all hopes o' ever seein' hide nur ha'r o' my dandies ag'in, up to the time I ketched thar bufs a-clatterin' up yen' way, an' see what looked powerful like a boss-thief makin' time fer open kentry. So—what's aildin' of ye, Billy?"

Up to this moment Anthony Porter had remained back of the shattered stage, where his presence had not been remarked by the frighten-

ed gambler. But now, more through restless ness than any thought of producing such an effect, he stepped forth, to see Carter shrink back with warning hands, turning ghastly pale, as though confronted by an avenging ghost.

"Don't—I didn't mean—I was coming back to help!" he gasped huskily, one hand creeping up to his breast as he shrunk away from that smoke-enwreathed shape—shade, as his shaken nerves made him fancy.

Topsy Todd, who was watching his every motion, quickly gained his side, gripping a shoulder and shaking that hand from his bosom. He was taking no chances, and if the gambler sought for a weapon, his fingers were cheated out of their wish.

"Ef he don't take ye fer a spook, boss, I don't ax a red cent!" the driver cried, with a short, reckless laugh. "Why, Billy, boy, roust up! Don't ye know the gent? Don't ye know—"

"Of course I know!" rallying with a desperate effort, a sickly grin causing his long mustache to twist and curl. "Didn't we take that nasty tumble down here in company? And didn't I—your hand, Mr. Porter!" both of his own going out as if in great gladness. "I tried to hope, but this is 'way-up better than I could really believe! I felt almost certain you'd cashed in, for all time."

Anthony Porter submitted to have his hand caught between those two damp palms, his gray eyes fixed steadily upon that face.

"Then I am to thank you for pulling me out of the wreck, sir?"

Carter shrunk a bit at this query, but as his shifty eyes caught those of Topsy Todd watching him, he hastily replied:

"I had to. You blocked my way a bit, and I couldn't be sure that we hadn't tumbled into instead of out of the fire. So—yes, I reckon I may say I pulled you out of the wreck, sir."

"An' then you lit out fer to ketch my leaders, didn't ye, Billy?" quickly chipped in the driver, cutting short the words which he fancied were rising to Anthony Porter's lips. "How come ye to know which way o' Little Crick Gulch to look fer 'em, Billy?"

"Why, I heard one of them whicker, and so—"

"You 'lowed it'd be easier ridin' than hcofin' it clear to Rocky Comfort, didn't ye?"

"Only thought of how I could bring help back here the quickest."

"But you reckoned we was past help: you shorely reckoned we was croaked, Billy? Ef not—thar was the crick: why didn't ye try ef cold water wouldn't help fetch the boss around?"

Carter stammered something about his fears lest the horses get entirely out of range before he could secure them, rallying his nerve and wits once more as Todd apparently swallowed that explanation without a doubt.

"Waal, of course it's all right, Billy, an' when I git more time I'll beg pardon fer takin' ye fur a dug-gun boss-thief. Now, ef we count on doin' ary good to them as was left up yender on the trail, we want to begin bustlin'. Reckon we'll try it up gulch," with a nod of his head in the direction from whence the gambler had ridden.

"You can't make it, Topsy!" quickly cried Carter. "It's all one mass of fire, for I tried—"

"Then you did try to git out at that end, Billy?" grinned Todd, with a malicious glitter in his eyes as his trap was sprung. "Was headin' fer Rocky Comfort, wasn't ye?"

"I just wanted to make sure if we could escape that way, then I was coming back—didn't you see me coming back, confound you, man?"

"But you 'lowed we all was croaked, Billy. Don't fergit that!"

Despite the uncomfortable degree of dry heat which filled the narrow gulch, drops of sweat started out on the gambler's naturally red face. His shifty eyes fell, and his lips quivered as he muttered something about the body, and his wish to save it from the flames.

"That's a lie, Billy Carter," bluntly cried Topsy Todd, his pistol once more covering the gambler, his eyes flashing sternly. "You wasn't fetched back by no keer for a corpus. You come back jest to fetch this gent his lawful property. Fork over, Billy Carter!"

"I don't know what you're driving at, man!" faltered the gambler, shrinking from those eyes, almost as much as from that muzzle.

"I'll drive a plug o' lead clean through that cabeza o' yours, my laddy-buck, ef you don't dance to the chune I'm settin' up. Whar's that puss you tuck from this gent, when you reckoned he was too dead ever to kick up a row over it? Whar is it, I ax ye, Billy?"

"So help me—"

"I be helpin' ye, Billy Carter," sharply interposed the driver, his honest scorn getting the better of his naturally even temper. "An' ef you don't fork over what you stole from this gent, I'll help ye so mighty fur over the range that you'll never git back ag'in! Last time o' callin', Billy Carter! Show up!"

"Is this what you mean?" asked the gambler, producing the wallet, that sickly smile still alive.

"Show it to the gent, an' ax him. I'm got my grip full o' keepin' you in the traces, Billy."

"Yes, that is my property," instantly de-

clared Anthony Porter, taking the pocketbook but holding it in full view as he added: "Shall I prove my rights by describing its contents?"

"Your bare word is more than sufficient, my dear sir," bowed Carter, but without daring to remove his eyes from that armed hand. "If Mr. Todd had only spoken more clearly, so I could have guessed what he was trying to get at, there wouldn't have been any bother. How could I be sure he meant this? I picked it up, in the stage, hardly conscious of the act in my natural excitement, and never once thought of it again until this very instant!"

"Bite it off, Billy Carter!" cried Topsy Todd, in sheer disgust. "I like a liar, but you suit me too mighty well! You tuck that puss—"

"Haven't I admitted as much? And haven't I explained just why—"

"You've 'splained a mighty sight more'n you'll ever find anybody to b'lieve, Billy Carter. You was bred a gambler, but you was born a liar, an' ef you didn't larn to steal afore you larned to walk alone, then you've 'proved your time most turrible well ever sence. You shet, Billy Carter!" with a menacing motion of his armed hand. "I'm fillin' this pulpit, an' I'm gwine to finish my sarmon ef it takes all your bark off!"

"I say you stole that puss. You tuck it out o' this gent's pocket, when he didn't know nothin'. An' ef you wasn't sech a white-livered cur, you'd 'a' made sure he was dead afore you tuck to your heels, as I glimpsed ye doin', with the own two eyes o' me!"

"You lied when you said you ketched my hosses an' jest looked 'ef the upper gulch was open afore comin' back to save the body. You 'lowed to make a clean sneak to Rocky Comfort. You knowed mighty well that puss held a pile o' good money. Not steal it? Why, you mis-able cuss! Ef an angel from heaven was fightin' the devil to save your weenty black soul, you'd put in the time stealin' feathers out o' that angel's wings! An' ef he turned to ax what fur, you'd make oath you was doin' your level best fer to help lick the Old Boy! Bah! you make me sick to my stomach—you do!"

How much longer Topsy Todd's "sermon" would have lasted, can only be surmised, for Anthony Porter, uneasy at this waste of precious time, interposed when the indignant driver paused to catch breath.

"Let him go, I beg, dear man! I have my property back, and now—I must be doing something for my poor little girl!"

Billy Carter, cowed and half-stunned by that torrent of denunciation, slunk away to the other side of the wrecked stage, watching the two men as they talked hurriedly together. Viciously as he now hated the free-spoken driver, the gambler never once thought of trying to avenge himself by calling a deadly weapon into play. If ever they both won clear of that ugly scrape, his time might come, but not now.

It was no easy task, but Topsy Todd finally convinced Anthony Porter that their wisest, if not their only, course lay in mounting the horses and pressing on to Rocky Comfort as quickly as possible, there to enlist help to search for the missing people.

Even before the old gentleman was fairly won over to this view, Todd assisted him to mount one of the animals, scrambling upon the other himself, seemingly without a thought of the gambler.

But as they started to ride away, Billy Carter sprang forward with an appealing cry, saying:

"Don't abandon me, Topsy! Don't leave me alone to roast—for love of heaven, man! take me up behind you! Stop! it's murder, Todd! If you're human, take me up behind you!"

CHAPTER X.

FIGHTING AGAINST DESPAIR.

ANTHONY PORTER involuntarily checked his horse at that wild appeal. He forgot the theft committed by that wretch, and the cold-blooded brutality with which he, only a short time before, had abandoned another to his fate, though that other had been himself, and far more helpless in the face of peril than the wretch who was now begging for assistance.

"Keep on, you!" sharply cried Topsy Todd. "I'll double-up on my critters fer no man—an' he ain't even the shape of a man! As fer you, Billy Carter—"

"Don't leave me here alone, Todd! I'm strange to these parts, and I wouldn't know which way to turn, even if the fire and smoke wasn't so thick! I'll be your servant—I'll be your dog for the rest of my life, if you'll only let me ride—"

"Ride your 'magination, Billy Carter!" sneered the driver, urging both horses onward as the frightened gambler followed at a run. "It's plenty big 'nough to kerry sech as you!"

Carter tripped over a loose stone, and before he could rise to his feet, the horsemen had disappeared along the smoky gulch.

Anthony Porter ventured a remonstrance, but the driver cut him short. His horses should never be disgraced by his asking them to bear such a bundle of evil.

"An' the dug-gun fool is plenty safe, 'long's he keeps his eyes open an' don't run plum' into

the fire. You kin see fer your own self thar hain't nothin' to burn down hyar, to speak of. An' ef he keeps to the gulch, it's bound to fetch him out on the level, whar he kin sight Rocky Comfort 'thout more'n half-lookin'. So—don't talk! It leaves a nasty taste in the mouth o' me—*ough!*"

Anthony Porter dropped that subject, but he could not maintain silence. He must talk—if he could do nothing better to serve his missing child.

"But can't we do something?" he persisted, holding his uneasy nag in check as he gazed longingly up those rocks. "If you only knew! If you could even begin to guess what horrible torture this idleness is! If it was only child of yours that was lost up yonder!"

"I'd do jest what I'm 'visin' of you to do, boss," bluntly declared the other. "I'd push on to Rocky Comfort an' git men to help. An' while they was doin' of that, I'd git coffee, an' grub, an' all the little comforts a gal mought feel the good of, after a night in the hills, an' then I'd come back the fu'st minnit it was time enough to set foot on the hot rocks. That's what I'd do, ef it was my gal, sir."

"But—she may be caught in the fire and—God above!" as his trembling hands flew up to clasp his fiercely throbbing temples. "Give me a ray of surer hope, or I'll go crazy!"

"I'm givin' ye the best I know how, sir," calmly but earnestly replied Todd. "I've told ye your gal is in the hands of as good a man as these hills ever see; didn't he prove all that, when he did the job up yender? Would such a man stop the hearse an' ax ye to git out, ef he didn't know he was in a safe place?"

"If safe for her—a weak, delicate child, remember! If safe for her why do you refuse to go there with me? Is it money—I'll give you your own price, man, if you'll only help me look for my poor child!"

"Not ef you'd offer a thousand dollars, I wouldn't try it—from this, an' right now!" firmly declared the driver.

"I'll give you ten—twenty—any amount you can ask, only go with me! I'd go alone, only I don't know the way—I can't tell anything near the spot where I lost my darling! But you—you said you knew the point!"

"Ef I don't jest know, I kin make a good guess. But that ain't the idee, sir. 'Tain't the will that's lackin', but the 'bility. Look fer your own self, jest once," checking their mounts and sweeping a hand along that mass of fire and rolling smoke. "Ef we was out o' the gulch even, we couldn't live through that line o' fire. Ef we was on top o' the range, back o' the wu'st, mebbe we mought pick our way, but not from this side. We've got to wait until the fire eats itself out an' the rocks git cooler. Then—durn yer money, critter!" with sudden fierceness in face and voice as he added: "I'll do my level best fer the gal's sake, but ef you talk o' money ag'in—fer sech work—I'll make ye taste my fist, dead shore!"

"I didn't mean—don't bear too hard on me, my friend," muttered Porter, his erect figure drooping as their horses pressed onward. "I'm more than half-crazed now! I can't help—God in heaven! look down in mercy on my poor little girl!"

"He will—I knows it, boss," earnestly said Todd, leaning over to gaze into that pain-drawn face. "An' then, too, a mighty good man is doin' his level best fer her, right now, ye don't want to let slip the mind o' ye! Thar's heaps o' places 'mongst them rocks whar they kin find kiver an' perfection from the fire. An' ef that young feller can't make the best o' what offers, then I've forgot how to read the face of a gine-wine man when it comes up afore me!"

"I say—hellow thar!" just then came a strong voice from no great distance in advance.

"Who's—Topsy, by glory!"

"An' you're—"

"Dan Gregg, no less, old boy!" laughed the big fellow who had deserted the stage just before the trouble seriously broke over it. "But whar's the rest o' the outfit? Had a 'tarnal bu'st-up, hain't ye, lad?"

There was a hasty explanation on both sides. Topsy Todd told what he knew concerning the manner in which the stage came to grief, and Gregg explained his presence there in Little Creek Gulch.

"The fire driv' me down, Topsy, though I fit the best I knew, not to bluff," he said, with a low, careless laugh. "I reckoned I could make the rifle on the range, but it didn't lay in my keards. So—yar I be! What's the matter with the old gent, Topsy?" in a whisper.

Todd hastily explained, and that rugged countenance grew grave as its owner listened. With all his roughness, Dan Gregg had a big, manly, tender heart, and that agonized gaze up the fire-crowned rocks almost brought a salty moisture into his eyes.

"An' you're gwine to Rocky Comfort fer help, ye say, Topsy? Waal, I reckon it's pritty nigh the best, ef not the only thing ye kin do. It's a turrible job—turrible! An' she—why, man, I couldn't keep from thinkin' o' angels sech as mother used to talk—but whar's the use?"

Anthony Porter caught that softened tone,

and eagerly turned from that awe-inspiring prospect to gaze into that rugged face. He saw a deep, earnest sympathy there, and caught at the hope it inspired.

"Will you help me find my poor little girl, sir? I'll pay you any sum you ask, but—I can't ride away, leaving her here in the midst of all these flames! It would drive me crazy to think—"

"Would it make the waitin' any easier ef you could be whar you hed a look over the place she left ye, stranger?" slowly asked Gregg.

"If nothing better—yes, a thousand times easier!"

"Waal, what's the matter with you ridin' to Rocky Comfort by your lonesome self, Topsy?" turning to the frowning driver. "You kin tell the hull story, an' stir up the boys. They won't need money down fer startin' on sech a trip, when they once know a leddy is in trouble."

"Offer them any wages—I'll pay any price for their help!"

Still Todd hesitated, eying the half-crazed father dubiously.

"Kin he stan' it, reckon, Dan?" he muttered, in an undertone. "Won't waitin'—fer you cain't do better'n that, as you're old enough to know mighty well—come still harder onto him?"

"I can watch fer them—I can be where I'll have the very first glimpse of my darling, when they come out of cover!" cried Porter, his anxiety-sharpened hearing equal to catching those guarded words.

"I do reckon he's in the right, Topsy," gravely nodded Gregg. "You make fer town, an' do the best you kin. We'll be on the lookout fer your comin', soon's the fire weakens. Ef you don't see or hear us by the time you git this fur, jest send up a yell, an' bu'st a few ca'tridges. Understand?"

"You're dead bent on stayin' hyar with Gregg, boss?"

By way of answer, Anthony Porter sprang to the ground, handing Todd the lines. And with a crisp promise to do his level best for his end, the driver trotted along the gulch, quickly vanishing from sight.

While watching those vanishing shapes, another came into view from up the gulch, but Billy Carter only cast a shy glance toward them, keeping close to the further wall as he skurried away, evidently having in some degree recovered from his fright at being left behind.

"Don't—let him go!" muttered Porter shivering a bit as his hand gripped Gregg's arm in time to check that call. "He's an evil wretch, and his company could only bring evil to my little girl."

Although Gregg complied, his face showed how greatly surprised he was, and Porter briefly told him what had happened at the wreck.

"I knowed he was tricky, but I didn't think him *that* low down!" was the only comment made by the big fellow, as they once more pressed on toward the spot opposite where, from Todd's hasty description, Gregg knew Harper and Enid had been left by the runaway team.

He looked for and found a place where the hill opposite that point could be gained, and after making Anthony Porter drink his fill at the little stream, Gregg assisted his less active companion up the gulch wall.

The side of the gulch on which they now found themselves was comparatively free from trees, and the scrub was scanty. Here and there a spark or brand, carried on the eddying wind, had kindled a fire, but this was only in spots, and the spread could not endanger their lives.

"It's wuss furdur up, an' back yender," grunted Gregg, as they came to a pause half-way up the steep. "Pity the road didn't run on this side, but a critter can't al'ays hev what he wants, ye know."

"Where was it the horses started the second time?" asked Porter, catching his breath sharply as he viewed that expanse of fire, rendered all the more terrible by the heavy smoke concealing the occasional bare spots, making all seem a solid mass of flames save when the capricious wind swept those acrid clouds away in rolls and masses.

"Right across, pritty nigh whar you see the slope begin, ef I bit off Topsy straight," replied Gregg, pointing with a grimy finger.

Porter stared until his eyes ached and watered, his thin hands clasped tightly together, his breath coming in short, painful gasps.

Over there? Where the fire seemed at its very worst! Where hardly a rock-crest rose clear of that bill of flame and smoke! Over there? And his child so delicate, so tenderly reared, so poorly equipped for such an awful fight for dear life!

"Don't fergit that it's a mighty sight wuss now then it could 'a' been then, pardner," said Gregg, in feeble consolation. "He hed time to pick an' choose, an' though you wouldn't think it, to look from hyar, thar's plenty o' places whar a stiddy-narved man mought hide cut in even a hotter fire'n that. So—ef ye give way so soon, what good kin you be fer the leddy when she does turn up?"

"Then—there really is a chance? You don't say that, just to soften the blow? You really believe my darling is alive—and safe?"

"I raally do," nodded Gregg, with all the appearance of sincerity, whatever doubts he might be inwardly entertaining. "Why, right across thar—whar you see the two big trees still standin', though pritty nigh ready to take a tumble—they's a hole big 'nough fer a hull regiment o' critters to hide into! I was makin' fer it my own self, but the fire cut me off, an' I hed to take to the gulch."

"And you still think they could have found it?"

"'Twas thar to be found, anyway. An' thar's plenty o' others, too, layin' round loose. An' ef—wait a bit, pardner, an' I'll see ef they're in sound o' hearin'."

Drawing his revolvers, Greg fired shot after shot, sending forth a prolonged shout between each pair, then listening for a response in kind. But none such came. No human shape showed itself. And then, in spite of himself, the big fellow showed something in his face that was close akin to despair.

"You fear—you also fear the worst?" faltered Porter, huskily.

"No I don't, but—ef they was both men! As it is, ef they ain't in that hole—waal, I reckon thar's goose is cooked!"

CHAPTER XI.

EXPLORING THE CAVERN.

FOR once Grip-sack Sid was caught squarely off his guard, and before his wits could rally, that damaging admission had passed his lips.

"Then—we can't get out?" faltered Enid, her face seeming ghastly in that light.

Harper caught the lantern from her unsteady hand, fearful lest it should break in dropping, thus lessening their slim chances by one.

"What brought you? I thought you was sleeping. Did you reckon I was trying to run away?" he demanded, almost harshly, as his free hand drew her back from those heated rocks.

Enid forced a smile as she looked into his face. That discovery had greatly shocked her, as was perfectly natural, but she seemed bent on showing him it had not seriously lessened her confidence in his truth and friendship.

"You do us both wrong in saying that, Mr. Harper. And yet—I did try to deceive you! I knew you wouldn't let me come, and so—I so wanted to see for myself what that awful crash portended. And then, it seemed as though papa surely must be looking for me, just outside! It seemed as though his voice was ringing in my ears and—and I just had to come!"

Rapidly as she spoke, swiftly as those sentences shaped themselves, it gave the Get-there Sharp time to gather himself and decide on the wisest plan of procedure. That the entrance was blocked, he could not deny, since Enid had the full use of her eyes. That it was an immovable barricade he was not ready to admit, even in his own mind.

"Beg your pardon, Miss Enid, if I spoke roughly, just now," he said, with a return to his pleasant, half-brotherly, half-paternal manner.

"I reckoned you were far away, in realms of sleep, and your coming gave me such a start—I'll look for gray hairs, the first mirror I meet up with!"

"You can laugh? With those rocks barring our escape?"

"With, or at 'em, just as you prefer, my dear," nodded Harper, slipping a hand through her arm and turning away from the front.

"No—let me call! Maybe papa is near enough to hear me, and I could never forgive myself if—"

"All right," nodded Harper, facing about leading his fair charge as near the blocked entrance as the heat would permit. "You're a long ways too early, as I hinted, but if it will help relieve your mind, we'll duet together! Ready—sing!"

Time and again their voices rung out, now in unison, now singly, but intently as they both listened, no answer came to their calls. Only the dull, ominous roaring of flames and sharp snapping as limb or rock cracked open before the heat.

"Too soon by hours, my child," said Harper, at length, once more turning Enid away from that forlorn hope. "At the very best no human being can reach this spot before day dawns. Think how long the fire has lasted, and how thoroughly those rocks have been heated! If there should a building boom happen to drop down upon this benighted region just about this time, I'd make an independent fortune picking up ready-made lime! As it is—you are still afraid of me, Miss Porter?"

"Not that, only—it hurts me to hear you jest while—poor papa! Oh, why were we torn apart just when your help would be most precious?"

"Would you fare any better if I fell to weeping and lamenting, Miss Porter? Would our escape be any nearer if I folded my hands and spent my breath in calling upon dear ones for aid? For—did I tell you? I have dear ones, loved as deeply as you can love your father. If I thought that I'd never see their faces again, I'd be ready to die, even as as you seem, just now. But that isn't manly, even if you

think it womanly. I'm going to *get there!* And if you'll only try to help, instead of hampering me, we'll get there all the quicker."

While speaking, Grip-sack Sid had kept moving, and with the final words they came to the spot where his coat was spread out.

With an impulsive movement, Enid faced him, lifting his hand with the lantern, turning its rays squarely upon his face, her eyes gazing straight into his as she uttered:

"You told me all was well, after that awful crash. You led me to believe that our chances to escape were improved by it. You deceived me in that. How can I be sure you are speaking your real belief now?"

Her eyes were squarely met, and though, with each swiftly spoken sentence, Grip-sack Sid fully expected the next would be the hardest of all to meet: that of lying when he vowed he had seen Anthony Porter in safety after that second runaway: he never flinched. He even kept silence for a brief space, as though inviting still further charges.

Enid saw this, and her hand trembled, then released its grasp on his wrist. Harper turned the lantern a trifle, so that its rays struck both faces, then spoke gravely:

"I acted all for the best, Miss Porter, and time will prove my words. If nothing else, I've won a couple of hours of comparative ease for you, when a steady strain would surely have ended in your breaking down mentally, as well as physically. Now, you are better able to bear the whole truth, and I'm giving it to you in full doses."

"The hole we came in at is blocked. You saw as much, or I'd still keep it from you. But neither you nor I have examined it closely. It may be a trifling job to open the way again, or—I'm frank, you see!—it may be that tools will be required to drill or blast away those piled-up rocks."

"Grant the very worst: what then? Help is bound to come from Rocky Comfort, since there is a woman in the case. Even if the searching party has no suspicion that we are in this hole, they'll cover the ground thoroughly, at the earliest possible moment. They'll spare neither their voices or their weapons. And even if we happened to be off guard at the minute of their arrival, they'd make us hear in the end. Then—I have pistols, and they'd mighty soon hear my answer!"

"I didn't—I thought—"

"I can guess, and I'd rather that than hear your very unfavorable opinion of yours truly," laughed Harper, his free hand flitting swiftly before her lips in warning. "I've done my level best to clear away the past, and now—I know it's a herculean task, but I mean to 'get there!' Now, I want to win not only your trust, but your assistance. Is there any hope for me, Miss Porter?"

"I don't understand, sir. If I can do anything—"

"You surely can, if you only will," was the quick interposition. "Twill be hours yet before any outside assistance can come; not much before dawn, if so soon as that. I've showed you how simple a matter 'twill be to attract their notice from here, while they are searching the road where we were last seen. But I hate to wait with folded hands for others to do what I ought to do my own self! If I can't make the turn in this deal, 'twill be the first time my wits went back on me."

"What is it you wish me to do, Mr. Harper?"

"First, to follow orders when I swear that I give them mainly for your own good. Next—and I'm not so sure but what I ought to have set this at the head—can't you forget that this morning we were strangers? Can't you do as I could wish my own wife to act should fate fling her into a scrape like this? As I said before, I'm almost old enough to be your father, and plenty venerable enough to be your old brother! Now—can't you play we are brother and sister, both in trouble, but each sensible enough to trust the other? I could work so much easier if I didn't have to stop and remind myself that you are a strange lady, unused to my off-hand style. Shall I give you this, my choicest treasure while away from the originals," his tones softening, as he held up the plush-covered case. "Will you take this as a pledge, an amulet, a covenant?"

"I never had a brother, but—treat me as you would a sister, my friend," slowly said Enid, her hand going out, to be swallowed up in his, with a hearty grasp and shake.

"Good enough, and better yet, sister Enid! Now I'm at ease, and we'll astonish the natives by getting there without their help! That is, unless signs fail. Come, sister Enid: let's take a little walk!"

If this was meant for a test of that compact so oddly made, it did not find the maiden lacking. Without a word of objection she yielded to that gentle impulse, though her face showed a little paler as she saw they were moving still further away from the entrance to the cave.

Harper laughed softly after a time, nodding his approval as he looked down into that fair face so near his shoulder.

"Now I know you gave no idle pledge, Enid, and when there's more time to spare, I'll do my

thanks up in a bundle for your acceptance. Just now—did you notice it?"

"That smell, as of coal-gas?" hesitated the maiden, coughing like one who had been holding it back with difficulty.

"I didn't mean that; don't give it a thought, little girl," hastily said Harper, sending the flash on ahead and leaving his face in the shadow. "That's nothing to speak of, and I meant—stop a moment! Can't you feel a faint draught, now one way, then the other?"

"I'm not sure, but—if there is such?"

"It means there's another way of getting out of this den, and that strikes me much more favorably than the idea of sitting with finger in mouth, waiting for others to finish up the job. See?"

"You think there is another opening? And we're looking for that, right now?" a glow of interest leaping into her eyes at the thought.

"Unless you'd prefer going back to the old place," with a light laugh at her evident pleasure.

"But if it should be too far—if it should lead us so far away that we couldn't get back in time to meet papa when he comes with assistance?"

"Is that likely, Enid? Remember, we have the biggest part of the night to do our exploring in. Even if this irregular draught should be caused by the outside heat alone, and we find this no thoroughfare, we can find the end and still get back in ample time for breakfast."

"Unless—if we should get lost?" hesitated Enid, shrinking a bit closer to his side as the shifting light revealed a dark hole leading off at an angle with their course.

"Teach your grandmother—excuse me! I'm only your big brother," with a gay nod of apology, his hand fumbling inside his grip. "I've thought of all that, and you'll see how I mean to blaze our trail."

Guided by the lantern, Grip-sack Sid marked the smooth rocks with blue chalk, then tucking her hand through his arm, once more pressed onward.

Gay, careless though he seemed, his tongue running glibly, Harper was ill at ease. The smell of coal-gas was growing stronger the further they advanced, and more than once while flashing his light along the walls, he noted streaks of impure coal here and there.

True, the air was fully as pure here as it had been back where they had rested the second time, but by good rights it ought to be far purer, since the draught, if such the barely perceptible current of air could be called: now stronger, now dying away to nothing: was mainly against them. That made it clear the smoke, or gas, could not come from the end of the cavern by which they had entered.

Was there a fire at the other end? Was it even worse than a fire of trees and brush, fierce but short-lived?

The Get-there Sharp kept these ugly fears to himself, showing Enid only the lighter, gayer side of his nature, doing his level best to keep her spirits up, feeling as he did that sorrow enough awaited her when her own peril had come to an end.

There was nothing of particular interest in their discoveries, though an occasional crevice or passage led away from the main cavern, now on one side, then on the other. Grip-sack Sid marked each one of these, even when seemingly insignificant, for he was taking no unnecessary chances. Yet none of these openings seemed worth a careful examination, and they stuck to the largest portion of that labyrinth.

They had explored a considerable distance in this manner, when, all at once, a strange sound came from their front, and as Grip-sack Sid flashed the light of his lantern that way, both he and Enid cried out.

For, framed in darkness, they beheld a ghastly pale face ahead!

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

"STEADY, there!" cried Harper, sharply stepping in front of Enid and jerking forth a revolver. "Who and what are you?"

A sobbing cry came in answer, and the figure of a woman, her hands outstretched, her face flushing with reviving hope, sprang into the clearer light.

"I thought—I lost my way—thank Heaven for this!"

With a flush of shame at having drawn a deadly weapon on a woman—a young and by no means homely one at that!—Harper thrust his six-shooter out of sight. He involuntarily recoiled a little at the same time, much as though he feared being clasped by those arms, the movement throwing the yellow light squarely upon the face and figure of Enid Porter.

The stranger recoiled, with a sharp gasp of bewilderment, one hand flying back against her breast as though her heart required pressure to keep it within bounds.

The two women gazed into each other's eyes for a single breath, something like recognition fighting its way into each face. Then, with another panting cry, the stranger spoke:

"Is it—Enid Porter?"

"And you are—"

"Helen Brandow, your Cousin Helen!"

Harper gave a low whistle of mingled surprise and doubt as he saw and heard this. Helen Brandow almost fell upon the neck of her relative, sobbing and talking, but so incoherently that even Grip-sack Sid failed to catch her exact meaning.

The young woman—she was nearly thirty, though even under such disadvantageous circumstances she looked several years younger than that—seemed fairly hysterical with fright and joy commingled, and feeling the importance of getting at the bottom facts, the Get-there Sharp once more called upon his faithful side-partner, the alligator-skin grip.

"We are friends, if you are in need of such," Miss Brandow, he said, gently yet firmly taking the woman by an arm and seeking to relieve Enid of her weight. "Sit down, please. You are too sadly excited to stand and we want—"

"Excited?" she echoed, with a sharp, hysterical laugh, then breaking down in no less wild sobs. "If you only knew! Lost in such a horrible place! Lost in the dark! And all around grinning such hideous faces—don't let them come!" her voice rising to a shriek as she shrunk back, yet clung almost fiercely to his arms. "Save me from—don't let me go mad! Don't let—ah-h!"

Her fierce grip loosened, and only for his ready hands, she would have fallen heavily to the rock floor.

"You are safe with us, ma'am," he assured her, as he gently lowered his burden, supporting her shivering head and shoulders against his knee, holding the lantern out for Enid to take. "Let me have the light until I can see to—drink a bit, ma'am," holding the brandy flask to her lips. "Drink, I tell you!" with kindly sternness. "You need strength, and this will give it you. So—now try to realize that you are with friends who'll protect you from all danger: even imaginary ones."

As it had with Enid when she felt the need of just such stimulation, the strong liquor did its work now. Little by little Helen Brandow rallied, her shivering ceased, her breath came more evenly, and her wild eyes no longer swept around in terrified expectation of once again beholding those grinning phantoms.

As she grew calmer, Harper motioned Enid to take his place, setting the lantern down where its light, without falling squarely into their faces, gave them ample opportunity to see each other. He drew a little apart, silently watching and listening.

His memory turned back to the story Enid had told concerning Esau Jacobs, and he knew that this woman must be the cousin of whom she had spoken so briefly, as living in Chicago.

"She didn't like her over well," he mused, as he recalled those past words. "She don't like her any better now, though she shows such tender care, soothing her as a mother might soothe a fretful child. She is pretty near as good as they make 'em, nowadays, but—how about this black-eyed cousin?"

Grip-sack Sid was far from being as fully assured on that point, and if he was faulty in his judgment, his swift instincts were to blame.

Yet, even with smoke and smut marring her face, added to the distortion which acute suffering, even though from an imaginary cause, never fails to work, Helen Brandow was a beautiful woman. Her hair and eyes were black as the gloom out of which she had so strangely come. Her features were almost classic in their regularity, the sole exception being in her too-full lips, now regaining their rich color.

Her figure was more than good, well-rounded, lithe and graceful, though her height was considerably above the average of her sex.

Not much could be said as to her garb, for that was torn and soiled and charred in places, as though she had been forced to run a gantlet of fire as well as those whom she had so strangely met.

That Helen Brandow was possessed of a goodly share of courage, despite the pitiful show she had so recently made, was evident to Grip-sack Sid as he watched her remarkably rapid rallying. Either she was very susceptible to liquor, or else her nerves were more than usually strong for one of her sex.

She asked Enid to explain how she chanced to be in such an out-of-the-way place, and listened with almost painful interest while her cousin briefly explained what had happened. She gave a little cry as Enid spoke of Rocky Comfort, and when the latter paused, she said:

"And I was bound for Rocky Comfort, too! I wonder—What were you going to such a wild place for, Enid?"

"Don't you think you'd better rest a little longer, ma'am, before trying to talk so much?" interposed Harper, coming forward. "You have suffered greatly, or your face betrays itself, but so has Miss Porter."

"You forget that we are both women, and talking is our best restorative, dear sir," said Mrs. Brandow, with a short, forced laugh as her dark eyes sought out his face from the surrounding shadow. "And I can't help—Enid, did that mysterious Esau Jacobs have anything to do with your coming here?"

"Everything, almost. He asked us to meet him at the Sweet Home Hotel, in Rocky Comfort. And you?"

"Received precisely the same request—command, I might call it," with a repetition of that forced laugh, as she brought forth a dainty pocketbook, from which she extracted a slip of a photograph, the same in shape as that carried by Enid, but showing the middle of a well-dressed man, instead of his feet. "Did you get anything like this?"

After comparison was made, Helen Brandow began to tell her story, which was, in part, similar to the perils Enid had been called upon to pass through.

She had come by stage as far as Cooley's, but owing to the widely spreading fire in the hills, the stage to Rocky Comfort had been abandoned for the time being. She would not hearken to reason, and finally managed to secure a couple of horses, with a man named Fred Meyers to act as guide and escort to Rocky Comfort.

"They prophesied we'd never get through alive, but I wouldn't hear to reason. I never could bear being balked, you know, once my mind was set on anything. And, though I had to ride a man's saddle—just think of that, Enid! I persisted in making the venture."

She told how matters gradually grew worse, and only for a sudden change in the wind, which cut off all retreat, she admitted that she might have turned back. But since they could not retreat, they did the best they could until—

"A falling tree frightened our horses. My escort was thrown by his, and mine ran away with me. I managed to keep my seat, until the saddle turned and let me down. The brute broke away, leaving me hemmed in by the fire on all sides, as it seemed to me."

"I don't know all I did try, but I couldn't die such a hideous death! And so—in the end, when I was about to despair, I stumbled into a hole—it seemed little better, and smelt just awful! I felt the flames were chasing me still, and I kept on through the darkness until—may you never know what that means, dear girl! I was lost! And then—I believe I must have gone crazy! Such horrible things seemed chasing and hunting me, and if I hadn't—but I did find you, darling! And now I feel almost safe, once more!"

At this point Grip-sack Sid saw fit to interfere, and though he spoke with seeming gentleness, under all ran a current of stern decision which not even Mrs. Brandow dared disobey.

"You both of you require rest, even if you can't sleep, and now that mutual explanations have been given, talking on such exciting subjects must cease. You surely will not force me to speak more unkindly?"

"I will gladly obey you, sir," said Enid.

"With you as guardian, dear sir, I feel that I could almost sleep!" declared her cousin, with effusive gratitude in her flashing eyes. "But surely you are not thinking of leaving us?" a trace of fright coming into her tones as he picked up the lantern.

"I must, but I will not be gone long. You will be company for each other, and by keeping in mind that I am working for your good, as well as for my own, you'll hardly miss the light before I get back."

"Must we stay? Can't we go with you?" faltered Enid.

"You really must stay, and right here. Don't move a foot from this spot, for I'll expect to find you right here on my return. As for your going along, please look at it reasonably, ladies. If there is a fire at the other end which defies passage, we've got to go all the way back, and by stopping here you'll be rested for the trip either way. I'd leave you the light, but in the dark I might go astray, and poor goods though I be, I'm the only escort you've got, remember!"

"We'll stay, since you think best. Only—please come back as quickly as possible," murmured Enid, rising to grasp his hand warmly.

"Be sure I will. Now, mind: don't stray a foot from where I leave you, no matter how uncomfortable it may grow. If tempted, Mrs. Brandow, just give a thought to what you suffered when really lost in the dark."

"Don't mention it, or I'll—Ugh!" with a shiver, as she cast an involuntary glance over her shoulder.

Stay right here, then. You'll see the light first, of course, but if anything should happen to the lantern, I'll call your names, and add my own to it, so there can be no mistake. Now—wish me good luck!"

Without pausing for more, Grip-sack Sid moved away in the direction from whence Mrs. Brandow had appeared, flashing his light from side to side as he advanced, pausing at each opening or side chamber to make liberal use of his blue chalk.

Only once did he feel at fault, where the cavern divided into almost equal parts; but, pressed though he was for time, the Get-there Sharp kept his wits about him, and after a careful examination, he saw where Helen Brandow had left a single footprint in a narrow streak of dust.

What gave him his worst uneasiness was the increasing scent of burning coal. Already his throat was feeling raw, and he frequently had to cough as a temporary relief to that irritation.

The light showed him thicker veins of impure coal—more than slate, yet hardly coal itself—lying between layers of rock. And, too, the heat was steadily growing greater.

"That's consoling, from one point of view," he muttered, pressing on after marking yet another opening with chalk. "It proves there's an opening ahead—unless the whole inside of the hill is afire!"

He fought back that ugly idea, finding it so much more comfortable to believe that a practicable opening lay not far ahead, through which he might guide the ladies; after which, he felt confident, it would be no serious task to safely escort them into Rocky Comfort.

"I said I'd get there, and I'd like to turn the trick my own—"

"Who's that?" came a hoarse voice from the darkness ahead, just at that juncture, and swiftly masking the light, Harper drew a pistol. "Who's that? Talk quick, or I'll let blizzer! I've got ye lined, an' I'll fire at yer jump!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FINDING ONE AND LOSING TWO.

A MORE disagreeably business-like speech Sidney Harper had not listened to for many a long day, yet it could hardly be said that he fully admired those sentiments.

They came to him through the now unbroken gloom, just as he lifted the hammer of his six, and just in time to check a sidelong bound which surely ought to foil an enemy who had located him before his light was cut off.

"All right, my covey!" he retorted, giving his voice a ventriloquist twist as a further warning to that unseen knave. "You fire by ear, and I'll shoot by sight. My goods against yours that I come nearest the dead center, too!"

"Who be ye, anyhow?"

"You tell; who be ye, anyhow?"

There was a certain amount of risk in this sort of badinage, as no man knew better than the Get-there Sharp. With each word a bullet might come from that unseen adversary. And yet—he hardly believed that, either.

If the fellow was really thirsting for gore, why had he run the risk of sending such a challenge? Why had he not improved the opportunity offered by the lantern, instead of throwing away that advantage?

True, he spoke of firing by sound in case his target should try to leap out of line, but he could not do this without exposing himself to a snap-shot by the powder-flash. Every moment that passed without his firing, would add to the natural uncertainty of such shooting, for Grip-sack Sid kept changing the pitch of his voice with nearly each word he let pass his lips, oddly sounding and distorted even to his own ears.

There was a brief silence after that mocking echo from the Get-there Sharp, and he, listening keenly for a possible advance, crouched lower and slipped inch by inch to the left hand, not a sound marking his movements.

"I say, stranger!"

"Why don't you keep on saying, then?"

"Reckon I was a bit too brash, jest back a bit, but you come on to me so dug-gun skeery, like, that I blew out the fust words come handy. What's the matter with a flag o' truce?"

"Strike a light and let me have a squint at your mug, to even-up matters. You saw mine, and—"

A smothered groan from the darkness ahead caused Harper to stop short, and then, with a perceptible weakening in his tones, the unknown spoke again:

"I'm a cl'ar cripple, stranger! I couldn't fight a sick kitten ef—dug-gun ye!" with groan and snarl commingled. "Wish't ye would! shoot! Ef I hed ary match, I'd set up this durn leg fer a target!"

All at once an idea struck the Get-there Sharp, and he called out:

"Look here, stranger; you don't happen to have lost a lady, of late? Because I've found one, and if you're the man I begin to think, we'd ought to be shaking hands in place of talking shoot."

"Found a leddy? You don't mean—ef she got safe, then durned ef I'm keerin' fer jest a mashed up leg!"

"Your name, and where from?" persisted Harper, though nearly convinced that they had both fallen victims to a false alarm.

"Fred Meyers, last from Cooley's. An' you air—"

"Powerful glad to meet you, Freddy!" cried the Grip-sack Sharp, at the same time unmasking his lantern and sending the fan-light in advance of his brisk steps. "Powerful glad—or would be, if I didn't find you in such bad order, my lad!"

Truly, it was an object fit for sympathy that the light revealed. A recently strong, active athlete such as the mountains or plains alone can raise, but now a prostrate cripple, scorched by fire, blackened by smoke, rendered haggard by pain from the broken leg which left him helpless almost as an infant.

"An' you—the leddy, pardner?" eagerly insisted Meyers, one hand shading his sunken eyes from the light which seemed so painfully brilliant, after his being in utter darkness so long, the other, still gripping a revolver, supporting the weight of his body. "Ye ain't tryin' to stuff me? Ye hev see'd her? She is safe—eh?"

"Safe as safe, and sound as a dollar, pardner, on the word of a man who's a heap sight whiter than your eyes may think," laughed Harper, giving his grimy face a rub with a sleeve, then fumbling at his grip sack as he turned the light upon that helpless limb.

"Ketched it when my critter throwed me," grunted Meyers, in explanation. "Ef it'd broke clean off, meat too, I could 'a' made better time—heap sight easier, too!"

"Bad enough, but not past mendin' if—I say, pardner!" casting a swift glance around, though the darkness prevented his making any discovery. "You didn't pull the hole in after you?"

"Nary, pard," with a sickly grin. "Fer one thing, 'twas too mighty dug-gun hot fer my paws!"

"Fire crowding you close, eh?" slowly asked Harper, his tones even enough, but with his heart sinking a dozen degrees.

"I hed to crawl right through it, stranger. The hide come off in spots, an' the stink pritty nigh shet off the wind o' me, but—waal, thar was still wuss outside, an' I knowed this yer hole was my only show fer a git-over-it!"

"You couldn't come far with such a leg, though?"

Meyers laughed harshly.

"A critter never knows how much he kin do ontel the tight pinch comes, pardner. An' yit—waal, mebbe 'tain't so powerful fur off, but I'll bet my leg ag'inst yours, that you cain't go from hyar to the fur end o' that hole in less'n a week! Take me up?"

"When I know just what you mean—maybe."

"You kin smell, pardner?"

"I smell coal smoke and gas—yes."

"That's it. It's a hole o' fire, an' there's coal all 'round it. I come through, but ef I didn't, I knowed it meant roast. That was a turrible while ago, an' the smell's bin gittin' wuss ever sence. So you kin figger out what that hole must look like by this, stranger!"

"I'd heap sight rather trust my eyes than my imagination, Freddy," laughed the Get-there Sharp, his spirits seeming to rise as his hopes fell. "Hate to leave you so soon, and in the dark, too!"

"Don't mention it, pardner!" with a sickly laugh. "I kin shet the eyes o' me, an' play I hed to, 'long o' the sun's shinin' so turrible strong. Then—you're gwine look?"

"I reckon I'll have to, pardner. With such a brilliant imagination as yours, who knows? Your mountain may prove a mole-hill, your sun but a lightning-bug!"

"Ef you find it open, you'll come back?" hesitated Meyers, his rugged features working, his honest lips ashamed to utter the prayer which rose in his throat.

"I'll come back, open or shut, old fellow," quickly said Harper, more deeply affected by that reticence than he would have been by a flood of piteous appeals. "I'll do all I can for you, and if I get there in good shape, you'll be near enough to hear me whoop. You're not afraid to trust me, old man?"

"Bet I hain't! So long, pardner! Keep right that way, an' you'll come to the smellin' factory, pritty quick, too!"

Grip-sack Sid took the line pointed out by the crippled mountaineer, pressing rapidly forward despite the foul air, which grew worse with each rod he covered. He kept his light swinging from wall to wall, to guard against going astray on his return; but he found no side-issues between the spot where Fred Meyers lay, and that from whence he caught his first glimpse of a dull red glow in advance.

Despite the choking fumes with which the air was thickly laden, and the heat which caused his burns to smart and throb savagely, Grip-sack Sid pressed on until he could no longer doubt the ugly truth.

While too impure to burst into actual flame, the slaty coal contained bitumen enough to feed itself, and the irregular entrance was now a tunnel of glowing coals.

No human being could hope to even rush through that red gantlet to the world beyond. How then, could two weak women and a cripple be taken through?

Grip-sack Sid did not give over until fully convinced that an escape by means of that opening was utterly out of the question, for days, if not for weeks to come. And then with heavy heart, with aching temples, caused by that abominable gas and choking smoke, he made his way back to where Fred Meyers awaited his return.

"No thoroughfare, pardner!" was his salutation, the airiness of his tones proving him a true disciple of Mark Tapley. "And now, if you'll permit, I'll doctor that leg of yours a bit, before totin' you back to where I left the ladies."

"Them fu'st pardner," gruffly growled Meyers. "I don't count. I'm a man, an' kin hoe my own

row. Jest you hustle fer the leddies—but that sounds like more'n one!"

"And means just twice one," setting his lantern where its rays would do the most good, opening his grip-sack and bringing forth a pair of short, stout shears. "Tell you all about it while at work, since I haven't got any regular anæsthetic handy. Sorry, but I want a few strips of cloth—spoil your suit, but may save your leg!"

His tongue kept rattling glibly, while his fingers worked, doing the best he could with the material at hand. He lacked anything to serve as splints, but declared those bandages would serve the purpose until better could be come at.

His heart was heavy enough. His head ached fit to split, and that foul air was making it worse with each minute that passed. He knew that their chances of ultimate escape were lessened at least one-half by this latest discovery, to say nothing of having a cripple added to his already difficult burden.

But he kept all this to himself, and bluntly shut Meyers up when he ventured to protest against being balanced on that bowed back.

"You 'tend to carryin' the lantern, and let my end alone," he said, rising to his feet under that heavy burden. "You can't walk. Time's too short for crawling. We've got to get there. And this is the only way I'm smart enough to see. So—get there!"

Moving as evenly as possible, so as to keep from torturing the cripple through jarring his broken bones, Grip-sack Sid pressed on as rapidly as possible, only pausing for rest when actually compelled to do so.

Fred Meyers was a heavy man for his size, which was a little above the average, but it was not so much his weight that oppressed Harper, as the effects of the foul air he had been forced to inhale. His head seemed about to split open. His eyes grew blurred. An iron band seemed tightening about his lungs, and each hot breath rasped his raw throat.

Still, he said nothing, pressing on as rapidly as possible, knowing that, once more with Enid and her cousin, he could rest in comparative comfort until those nasty symptoms passed away.

It was impossible to keep his eyes constantly roving along the walls, but he raised his head at brief intervals for a look which should guard him against going astray, while Fred Meyers kept the lantern in motion from side to side.

When convinced that they must be nearing the spot where he had left the two women with such particular instructions against moving away, Grip-sack Sid paused long enough to give the agreed signal.

He called out both their names, then pronounced his own. He waited for an answer, but none came. He hurried on a few yards further, then repeated those calls.

Only those hollow echoes answered back! Again, and yet again he lifted his voice, until it seemed as though the roof of his skull must fly off. But not a word in response!

He rushed forward until at a spot which he could have taken oath was exactly where he saw the cousins together, but it was vacant.

"Mebbe it's funder on, pardner?" ventured Meyers, as Harper groaned.

"I left them right here!" stamping a foot sharply. "I told them not to stir, and they promised. Now—they've gone—lost!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE ABOUT ESAU JACOBS.

IN the height of his disappointment Dan Gregg said far more than he intended, and as Anthony Porter, with a smothered groan of despair, bowed his head and covered his face with trembling fingers, the honest miner began to realize his ugly misuse of words.

"Durn your fool tongue, Dan Gregg!" he mentally vowed, "I'll kick the stuffin' out o' ye fu'st show I ketch! Goose is cooked, you says, an' him a-watchin' the fire! An' him a-knowin' his gal is over yender some's! Double-durn a plum fool, I say!"

The sharp crack of a heated rock as it split open, gave him a hint which he was only too glad to grasp, and he cried out:

"Didn't I tell ye so, boss? Didn't ye ketch that shot?"

"Where—I didn't—don't fool me, man!" gasped Porter, lifting his head and staring wildly around.

"Fool be jo-hammered!" bravely cried the miner, forcing a broad grin into his face.

"Reckon I don't know a ca'tridge when it goes bu'st! Caint I tell—thar!" with a yell of delight that would have drowned the report even had it come from anything more substantial than his own imagination. "Nother county heard from! Didn't I jest tell ye that stranger could be 'pended onto!"

"You did hear—you really think it was in answer to our calls?"

"Wish't I was as sure o' everlastin' glory when I cross over the range, as I be o' all that, boss!" gravely declared Gregg, gripping one of those unsteady hands and shaking it vigorously. "I tell ye it's all over but waitin' fer the fire to cool off, an' then—"

"Enid! En-id! my child!" shouted Porter, straining his lungs to the utmost, pro-

longing the name and title as they passed his lips, then bending his face in hearkening for the response.

None such came. Neither cry nor shot answered him back, and that glad light began to fade from his bloodshot eyes as he looked around at his companion. But Dan Gregg was equal to the occasion, and promptly spoke up:

"Lord love ye, boss! Your voice couldn't git over thar, ag'inst all them noise, an' ef it did, an' ef she was to answer back, how ye reckon her weenty lungs could shove a sound this fur?"

"But the man—Harper?"

"Ef he's long o' her—which ye kin bet he is! An' ef they're in yender hole I spoke of—which o' course they be! Then how ye reckon we're gwine to hear a yell, when it tuck the bark off o' my ears jest ketchin' the whisper of a forty-four?"

"If I had only heard it, as well!"

"I don't know 'nother pa'r o' ears in all this range as kin come anyways nigh my two fer keenness, boss," gravely declared Gregg, wagging his bushy head the while. "An' you wasn't barkin', while I was. An' I reckon the stranger didn't tote more'n a round or two in his duds. So you see, ef he's as smart as I'm thinkin', he mighty sure he won't bu'st every shell jest now. He's told us he's on the ready, an' now he'll jest lay back an' take it easy—comfortin' the young leddy, ye mind, so she won't do too mighty much worryin' over what cain't be helped in a hurry. An' then, when them rocks gits cool 'nough fer men to tromple over, you bet he'll be ready fer to come out, or show us how to git in. See?"

Although he more than suspected that he was piling up trouble for the future, Dan Gregg had gone too far in trying to cover that awkward slip of the tongue, to hesitate now. At least Anthony Porter should have a few more hours in which to rally his strength for what the future held in store.

"You really believe they've found shelter in a cave, then?" wistfully gazing across the gulch while speaking.

"Dead sure of it, sir!" with reckless assurance.

"Then—if he would only show some sign! Why can't he thrust out a signal of some sort, to make all sure?"

"You see them trees—row ye don't!" with a sharp cry as the last of the timber above the mass of rocks came crashing down, sending up a shower of dazzling sparks and shooting into a fierce tower of freshened flames.

Anthony Porter groaned in mental agony. Surely this destroyed the last frail hope of his child's escape!

"Don't ye think it, man!" swiftly cried Gregg, gripping an arm and giving the agonized father an almost savage shake. "I tell you thar's room a-plenty in yender hole fer a hull rijment to hide intol. An' ef them trees do knock down a few rocks, what matter? Caint we open a way, even 'thout countin' the stout lads Topsy's gone to fetch?"

"But—the heat! If not suffocated, they will be roasted!"

"I tell ye no! They kin git fur 'nough back in thar to find ice, ef they want to! I tell ye—look hyer," with desperate calmness as he forced Anthony Porter to meet his gaze squarely. "Be you tryin' to drive me clean off o' this range, stranger?"

"I don't—I'm so nearly distracted that I don't know what I say or do!" his voice dying out in a piteous groan.

"That don't need more'n one tellin' fer b'lief, anyway," with a short, grim laugh. "But ef you're dead-bent on keepin' up that lick, then I'm gwine to take ye whar thar's a doctor as knows better how to manidge a crazy critter than I do—so thar!"

"I'm not crazy, dear sir, but—"

"You will be, ef a clapper ain't shet down onto it. An' now, boss, I'm slingin' straight goods at ye. Either you simmer down, or I'll take you nighest cut to Rocky Comfort to see a doctor. Which shall it be?"

Even one so sadly agitated as Anthony Porter could not help but realize how thoroughly in earnest the speaker was, and that threat acted on his shaken nerves as no less heroic dose could have done. Even in that brief interval, while eye met eye, Porter grew calmer.

"It's got a mighty rough bark on, I know, sir," added Gregg, throwing no little magnetic power into his keen eyes the while, "but I'm talkin' all fer your own good—to say nothin' of your gal. Keep on like this, an' you'll be clean crazy long afore the crack o' day. So—git down to hard-pan, or to Rocky Comfort you go! That's business, boss!"

Anthony Porter reached out a hand, clasping the grimy paw which went out to meet it. And though his voice was husky, he meant what he said when he gave that required pledge.

"That's hearty!" grinned Gregg, showing his relief in voice as in face. "We've got to spend the night in waitin', fer Topsy cain't git thar an' back afore sun-up, anyway. So—set down, an' take matters as easy as ye know how. Thar's light a-plenty fer us ter see the fu'st signal that stranger may stick out, ef he is shet up, ye mind."

Once more Anthony Porter obeyed. That frank, hearty manner was having its due effect, and having once suffered that awful strain to be broken, reaction was showing itself in an almost soothing lethargy.

Learning that his present companion was accustomed to smoking, Dan Gregg filled his wooden pipe with plug tobacco, and insisted on Mr. Porter taking a smoke.

"It'll not only help pass the time, but it'll soothe ye down a mighty heap, pardner," he declared. "As fer me, I kin chaw, fer comp'ny."

No doubt it was quite as much for the purpose of keeping the gentleman from brooding over the peril which must still be threatening his beloved daughter, as through empty curiosity, that Dan Gregg questioned the other about his business in that region.

And Anthony Porter, after a slight hesitation, spoke quite freely on that point, though keeping his exact business in the background. In doing so, he mentioned the name of Esau Jacobs, and despite the dullness which had fallen over his brain for the time being, he saw Gregg give a start, like one meeting an unexpectedly interesting point.

"Do you know anything about him, sir?" asked Porter, rousing up and betraying decided interest in eyes and voice.

"Waal, I knows this much," came the deliberate response. "I know folks say thar hain't his match, fer all-over richness, in seventeen States!"

"You mean he is wealthy? That he has a great deal of money?"

"Money, or money's wu'th," nodded Gregg. "Ef the smallest half o' what yekia hear told o' Esau Jacobs is true, it'd puzzle him like mighty to count up all the mines—gold, an' silver, an' coal, an' the likes o' them—that he owns by him own self! Mebbe they stretch the truth a mite, but it can't be all lies. An' you're lookin' to meet him yender in Rocky Comfort?"

"I started with that intention, yes."

"What fer lookin' critter is he, anyway? I've hearn so mighty much talk, that 'pears like he ought to be a daisy!"

"His looks? I really can't tell you that," slowly said Anthony Porter. "So far as I know, I never met the gentleman."

"An' yit you feter a gal—Ax pardon, boss," with a short, embarrassed laugh. "'Tain't none o' my fool' business, o' course, but it did sorter hit me as ruther funny, things bein' so."

"No harm done. You have proved your friendship, Daniel Gregg, and I'll never forget your kindness in my hour of sore trouble. But—I never met Esau Jacobs, to my knowledge, 'tis true; still, I have every reason to think he is a true friend to me and mine. I trust him so completely, that when he wrote for Enid and myself to meet him at the Sweet Home Hotel, in Rocky Comfort, I set forth on the journey at once."

"You know him, then?"

"Esau Jacobs?"

"No. Owen Potter, who runs the Sweet Home."

"I never heard of him until Esau Jacobs sent me his address."

"Waal, take a fool's advice, pardner, an' keep, anyway, one eye on Owen Potter while you're onder his ruff."

"Do you mean that he is dishonest?"

"I mean jest this, pardner," with grim gravity, as he marked off each sentence with a grimy finger on a still grimmer palm. "I mean that a slicker, oilier critter then Owen Potter never wore clothes. I mean that he kin out-lie a nigger ketched in a henroost, an' at the same time look ye in the two eyes with a smile as sleepy and mild as that of a baby which hes j-ust drapped the nipple 'long of hev'in' no room fer more sweet milk. I mean that you'll think a nicer, honester, slicker, innocenter critter never drawn breath than Owen Potter, an' all the time he'll be cheatin' the eyes out o' your head!"

"You surely give him credit enough!" laughed Porter, amused by that earnest denunciation.

"Credit fer bein' the devil while he plays angel—jest so!" with a vicious click as his teeth came together. "Mebbe ye reckon I'm pilin' of it on a mite too thick, 'long o' Owen's gittin' the best o' me in trade or swap, but you're off. I never hed no truck with him, but I know them as hev. An' they'll tell you the same as I do: Owen Potter 'll cheat the nose off o' your face, an' all the while he'll make ye think he's doin' ye a favor!"

"I thank you for warning me, Gregg. I'll keep on my guard while at the Sweet Home. If ever that time come!" with an involuntary sigh of returning doubt and fear as his eyes cast a glance across the gulch to that fire-surrounded mass of rocks.

"What's to bender?" lightly yawned Gregg, throwing aside his unusual gravity, bent on keeping his companion from relapsing into his former dejection. "You kin see that the fire's keepin' time with the night: both passin' off, gittin' ready fer a new an' gladder day. Why, pardner, I kin sca'cely keep the two boofs o' me from breakin' into a raal, ginewine hoe-down when they come to think o' how turrible glad

the little leddy will be when—oh, g'way, you!" averting his head, flinging out a hand, then keeling over on the broad of his back, to lift legs and rattle his bootheels together.

Neither graceful nor manly, but—it produced the desired effect.

Anthony Porter could not help laughing, and once more Dan Gregg tided over the dangerous break-down.

He showed that he could use his tongue quite as well as his heels, and kept Anthony Porter talking or listening in turn, through all those long hours; hours that would have been well-nigh unbearable only for his honest ingenuity in conjuring up matter for amusement and talk.

Dan Gregg never put in a better or harder night's work in his life.

CHAPTER XV.

MUST GET THERE—BUT HOW?

OF his own accord Fred Meyers slipped from the back of the Get-there Sharp, balancing himself on his one sound leg, with more care for the lantern than his own comfort.

"Hyar, sport, take it an' look closer!" he huskily cried. "Ef this is the same place—but it can't be, man!"

"It can't help but be—don't I know?" almost fiercely panted Harper, snatching the lantern away. "Right here I left them both! And my last word—Enid! Enid Porter!"

His voice sounded strange and unnatural to his own ears, and as the echoes were flung back by the rock walls, it would not have taken a much more excited imagination to have thought them the mocking notes of malicious gnomes or underground demons.

"Stiddy, pard!" cried Meyers, letting himself down upon the rocky floor. "Ef ye knowed what a changel! You'll skeer 'em clean crazy!"

Sidney Harper heard without heeding or fully comprehending. This horrible belief—and what else could he think? Coming, too, after he had endured so much! Coming when that foul air had dulled his wits even as it sharpened his suffering!

Staggering like one more than half drunk, Grip-sack Sid went from side to side of the cavern, flashing the light in all directions, now and then lifting his roughened voice to pronounce the name of the young woman in whom he had taken such a profound interest, doubtless springing madly from the mutual perils which they had shared of late.

Only her name: never once that of Helen Brandow, after giving way to the ugly fear that they had strayed from the rendezvous. For the time being he had forgotten that another than Enid must be in equal peril.

Thus, quartering like a perfectly broken setter in the field, Grip-sack Sid convinced himself that Enid was not being left behind as he pressed forward. His light searched every nook and angle in those irregular walls, and each passing minute helped convince him that, urged on by fright or irresistible longing to be near the spot where she had been parted from her father, Enid must have attempted to retrace the steps she had taken under his guardianship, and—

"She must have been mad! She's surely gone astray in—holy smoke of sacrifice!"

Grip-sack Sid stopped short, staring before him, unable to believe what his own eyes told him was surely true. And not until, breaking that curious spell with a desperate effort, he staggered forward and added touch to sight, could he believe that his way was barred, that instead of being in the main cavern, he had gone astray himself, to bring up at length where the chamber ended in a solid, blank wall.

This discovery, while a severe shock, proved a beneficial one, for it served to clear those dulled wits. Harper gave a cry of grim pleasure as he turned about to retrace his steps.

"Me bowling at the little lady for moving against orders, and all the time I was the sinner!" he grimly laughed, flashing his light from side to side, resolved not to make another such mistake. "But when? How? What matter?" breaking off abruptly.

He had gone astray while bearing the crippled mountaineer on his back, beyond a doubt, but now that he had received such a bitter lesson, he could and would guard against another false step.

Not having to search so closely, he was but a few minutes in retracing his steps, and he soon caught the call:

"Found any thing, pardner! Don't say ye hain't, or I'll—ef I've bin the cause o' losing the leddy, I'll blow my fool' head off!"

"I've got the mate to it between my two shoulders, Fred!" laughed Harper, that splitting headache almost killed by the intense relief that latest discovery had given his brain. "Between us, we've branched off from the right trail, but with all eyes open now, we'll surely get there—get there, sure!"

"Go find the right, an' make hurry back to the leddies, sport," the cripple cried, his grimy face all aglow with relief. "Find an' stick to 'em ontel they're safe ont o' this scrape, an' don't bother no more 'bout me—I'm all right!"

"Button up, and get up!" commanded the sport, squatting down in front of the injured

man. "I'd cut a fine figure, wouldn't I, telling the ladies how I left a cripple behind in the dark?"

"But ef—I mixed ye up one time, an'—"

"I'll take mighty good care you don't make it twice," with a short laugh. "Mount your john-donkey, sport! Easy your leg as best you can, for all I answer for now is carrying you and managing the light. You must hang on or take a tumble—see?"

Fred Meyers raised no further objections, but permitted the Grip-sack Sharp to have his own way. That was natural enough. Good man though he surely was, it would have been bitter as death to stay back there in the blackness, now he had supped of hope.

Harper kept his lantern in good play, and when he came to a break in the right-hand wall, where there seemed to be an almost equal division of the cavern, he hunted for and found the blue marks which fully assured him that, at last, they were on the right track!

"That's better than a full meal to a starving man!" he said, with all of his old-time gavety, striking out at a brisk pace once more. "Hang on, sport, and if your leg hurts too mighty bad, counteract the pain by chewing your tongue! On the down grade, steam up and blowers turned on! Get there! Didn't I tell ye I'd get there?"

After all, that mistake was not such a bad thing. It helped consume pretty near an hour, all told, of a night which bade fair to seem nearly endless. It broke the sick headache which was overpowering the Get-there Sharp, leaving him much better able to continue the fight; a fight where three other lives depended on his "getting there!"

Handling the light himself, and with his brain so much clearer than it had been when they went astray, Grip-sack Sid found no further difficulty in picking his way. He soon recognized a point near which he felt confident the young women had been left, and stooping low so that Meyers could slip from his back without hurting his injured leg, he bade him wait in silence until he could make sure all was right.

"It might scare them, to see a double-header coming right at 'em, pard," he laughed, as he advanced yet a little further before calling.

"Here!" came the clear, yet trembling voice of Enid Porter, an instant after his signal went forth. "Thank Heaven you have come back!"

"Me too!" chimed in Helen Brandow, with animation. "We'll never let you go again, without taking us along. I never before realized the full value of a man, but—"

"Glad to hear it, Mrs. Brandow," and Harper cut her speech short. "I've found and almost brought back a man on whom you have some sort of claim, or who has a claim on you, or—"

"Not—not my husband?"

Her voice grew almost harsh, and her face showed strangely blanched as the light fell fairly upon it. Harper stared in surprise, but rallying quickly, he gave a brief explanation of what had happened since their parting.

He saw that Helen Brandow recovered her composure nearly as swiftly as she had lost it, once he gave denial to her query. He scented a mystery of some description, but that was not the proper time for investigating it.

"Now you know the very worst, ladies," he concluded, speaking far more lightly than he felt at heart. "We can't get out this way, so we must get back to the front door, even if we can't do anything better than sit still and wait for callers from Rocky Comfort."

"You think—there is no doubt as to such coming?"

"Sure to, Mrs. Brandow," stooping to rest the lantern on a level spot. "I'm going after Meyers, but he's hardly out of talking distance, so you needn't be alarmed."

Enid caught up the light, insisting on bearing him company, and she met with no serious objection. They met Meyers, slowly dragging himself along, and after a short interchange of words, the cripple was hoisted upon Harper's shoulders, and the little party began their retreat.

Thanks to the precautions he had taken while coming, there was no serious danger of going astray, and Enid made all certain by holding the rest in check at each side issue, until fully assured by the blue chalk she was guiding them aright. And so, after occasional halts to rest the Get there Sharp, during which Meyers mournfully lamented his miserable helplessness, that journey was completed.

A dull glow was still forcing itself through that one crevice in the falling rocks, but all could see that the fire was gradually dying out for lack of fuel. And the rocks themselves, even this early, appeared to be losing a portion of the heat they had absorbed.

Harper only paused to make a superficial examination at first.

"It's too soon to even think of tackling the job, and then you two ladies positively must lie down and rest, even if you can't sleep. No arguments: I am reckless enough to insist, and if you really give me occasion, I can prove myself a grim old Tartar. Please?"

That abrupt change of tone made Helen Brandow laugh, and Enid gave back a wan smile as

she came closer, gazing steadily yet appealingly into his eyes.

"You still hope? For papa, as well as us?"

"For each and every one, yes," was the grave response.

"And you'll call me if—at the first sound from outside?"

"Yes, to each and every question you can think of in an hour!" he said, in mock impatience, pushing them back to where Enid had rested once before.

Watching until pretty well convinced neither of the young women would give him further trouble for a time, at least, Grip-sack Sid drew aside, taking the lantern with him, yet arranging it so the women could dimly catch its rays in case of continued sleeplessness on their part.

Covering his actions by turning his back, he opened the grip-sack and turned over its contents.

Among other things, the grip contained tools for reloading shells, in case his stock should be exhausted where he could not easily procure a fresh supply of pistol-cartridges. In company were a box of primers and a small flask of fine-grained powder, while a small box held a supply of bullets.

"Wish 'twas big as a boot!" he muttered, sighing a little as he shook the flask and estimated its contents. "If all hands went to smash when the hearse took that jump—and I can't see how they could do different, worse luck! If so, then I've got to work it out on my own hook. I must 'get there'—but how?"

Afraid to startle the women, or frighten them, even, by removing the light entirely, Harper dared not go make a more thorough examination of the rocks piled up before the entrance. He felt uneasy when he remembered what he had seen, and if he could have bought powder at ten times its weight in gold, just then, he would have jumped at the chance.

"I say, Meyers?" he called out in low, guarded tones, moving toward the crippled mountaineer. "Not snoozing, are you?"

"No danger, while this dug-gun leg is singing so mighty piert!"

"How many cartridges have you got about you?"

"Don't use 'em. Cap an' ball's plenty good fer me, an' my old Colt hes stood by me too many times fer to git the dirty shake—"

"Then you carry powder with you?"

In covert, but none the less high glee, Grip-sack Sid took possession of the flask produced, stowing it away in his grip, chuckling:

"I knew we'd 'get there,' but the *how* was bothering me! Now—if you wake up first, just yank the cover off o' me, pard! I'm too dead tired to stay awake another minute!"

Only waiting to hear Meyers promise, and say that there was nothing more he could do for his leg, just then, Harper went back to where the women could see his figure, then lay down and almost immediately fell asleep, never making a stir until a firm grip closed on his shoulder, and a low voice sounded in his ear:

"Daylight's come, pardner!"

"Eh?" lifting his head with a bewildered stare. "What's— Oh, that you, Meyers?"

CHAPTER XVI.

STILL THE GET-THERE SHARP.

"JEST me, pardner," replied the crippled mountaineer, in an apologetic tone, too low for the women to catch, even if they should happen to be awake, which luckily was not the case. "Hated to do it, you was 'joyin' yourself so turrible smart, but—you hyar that?"

"Shooting, by glory!" muttered Harper, springing to his feet, now thoroughly aroused. "How long?"

"Jest opened, sence I come to roust ye out. I see 'twas day, an' I reckoned you wanted to git to work afore the leddies knowed of it."

"Right you are, pardner! If I didn't feel sure we could do the job our own selves, I'd be in a bigger hurry to return that salute, but—I swore to *get there*, and I'm going to try!"

While speaking he was fumbling in his grip, and now, with both power-flasks ready, he hastened to the barricade, taking the lantern with him.

He could distinctly hear shots in the gulch beyond and below, with now and then a shout, but he fell to work without making answer to the signals which he felt reasonably sure were given for his benefit.

"That's all right, but if I can kick open a door, I'd hate to wait for a borrowed key! Of all things, give me independence and get-there-able-ness!"

Working with remarkable swiftness, considering the precision he displayed, Grip-sack Sid arranged his blast where he felt confident the powder, confined as the most of it was in metal flasks, would do the most good, then took the wick from his lantern, and only pausing to make sure Fred Meyers was not too near for safety, dropped the unlit end upon the short train, then leaped back and crouched low down in a little recess of the solid wall.

Almost immediately the flame enveloped the oily wick, firing the train and exploding the blast.

The noise was almost deafening, and brought a united scream from Enid and Helen as their sleep was broken. But Grip-sack Sid, pausing only long enough for a single glance through that cloud of blue smoke, sprung toward them, gayly calling out:

"Gong for rising, ladies! Hotel opened, and a lovely dawn just begging you both to step outside for a breath of fresh air!"

"Then—oh!" gasped Enid, as her fear-quickened ears caught the loud, excited shouts which came floating up the steep. "They've come! He's come! Papa—papa darling!"

Grip-sack Sid turned sick at heart and a sudden blindness caused him to stagger like a drunken man as Enid, crying out those joyous words, sprung past him for the opening.

In his hurry to "get there" without outside help, he had actually forgotten the horrible fate which he firmly believed had overtaken Anthony Porter, and now—how could the poor child bear up under such a soul-crushing blow?

With a hoarse, choking cry, he staggered toward the entrance, now nearly as free as when he had first passed through it. He never heard Helen Brandow calling to him, never knew how rudely he struck down her hand as it touched his arm. He had thoughts only for Enid, and how his strange forgetfulness had left her free to feel the full weight of that awful blow.

He called forth something, he never knew just what, and plunged through the opening with arms extended to catch the maiden before—

"Enid! my darling! Enid! I'm coming—father's coming!"

If a bullet had propped him, full in front, Grip-sack Sid could not have come to a more abrupt halt. Was he dreaming, or—

"Papal papal thank Heaven, you've come!"

"Wait—don't risk—I'm coming, birdy!"

Each word struck him with the weight of a trip-hammer, and he dug all knuckles into his eyes before he could believe what they showed him: none other than Anthony Porter, grimy, ragged, hatless, more disreputable in looks than ever before in all his life, yet remarkably active for a corpse!

"Glory to Moses!" he said, with a tremendous breath. "I said I'd get there, but I never thought I'd power to raise even the dead!"

"Yet you have done little less, Mr. Harper!" sounded a clear, not unmusical voice close beside him. "You have won us from a living grave, and—may I thank you, now?"

Grip-sack Sid turned to meet the bright, almost tender eyes of Helen Brandow, and instantly his strong excitement was forced under cover. Although he could give no reason for the feeling, he could not wholly trust this really beautiful woman.

"Well, while I fully value the property you claim I saved, Mrs. Brandow, I reckon you've already paid off that debt. Don't forget that I was in the same box, and was working for myself, as well."

"You are entirely too modest, sir," her hands warmly, almost ardently pressing one of his blackened ones, her big black eyes gazing into his face as though she could hardly get her fill. "Only for you, I must have perished in that horrible hole! Only for your coming, I would have gone crazy with terror! On all sides I saw—ugh!" with a shiver that was real enough. "Were I to live a thousand years, I couldn't even begin to express my gratitude for all you have done!"

"And while I'm drinking in your sweet flattery, Mrs. Brandow, poor Meyers is shut off from a share in this—well, call it general jubilee," with a laugh as the search party, headed by Topsy Todd and big Dan Gregg, fairly split the air wide open with their cheers and their swiftly worked pistols.

Without giving Mrs. Brandow a chance to check him, the Get-there Sharp sprung back to the entrance, just beyond which he came upon Fred Meyers, dragging his crippled leg along, a broad grin upon his scorched face as he listened to those glad sounds.

"I knew we'd get there, sport!" laughed Harper, lending the injured mountaineer a kindly hand, "but I really didn't count on making such a jubilee out of it. Still—sounds mighty comforting, don't it?"

"Wu'th a dozen busted legs, ef I had that many!" heartily declared Myers, his sunken eyes seeming to fill out, his grin broadening in sympathy as he gazed down upon that joyous gathering. "Ef ony—you hollered out somethin' 'bout breakfast, sport, back yender, an' ever sence that I've hed to fight hard to keep from chawin' my own tongue! Sounds mighty like pork, but—wonder ef ary o' them critters tuck thought to pack away a bite o' solid grub?"

"Dollars to cents some of them did," laughed Harper, moving away. "I'll skirmish around and if you keep an eye on me, and holler loud enough, maybe I can bring anyway a bite back for you. I'm wolfish, my own self, now I take time to think!"

Harper had made no rash wager, as investigation quickly proved. The search party organized by Topsy Todd had come fully supplied against all possible needs. Not only did they bring food and cold coffee in abundance, but

they also had blankets and other means of forming litters in case such should be needed!

Grip-sack Sid was greeted cordially on all sides, for Topsy Todd had not neglected to sing the praises due the outside passenger to whom he undoubtedly owed his own life, but he laughingly put all aside until he should have cared for the wants of the crippled mountaineer.

"Another time, gentlemen, when I'm not too hungry to feed on flattery," he cried, hastening back to fill Fred Meyers up with coffee and substantial. And he played a good second to the injured guide, even while keeping his sharp eyes well open.

He was in time to take note of the meeting between Anthony Porter and his niece, Helen Brandow, and his singed brows contracted just a shade as he took his notes.

"What's the matter there?" ran his thoughts. "Enid didn't appear dead stuck on the regal Helen, even while meeting under circumstances which naturally ought to make even perfect strangers stick closer than wax, if both were women. And now—just a little more coolness on the old gentleman's part, and I'd begin to look for frost!"

If his curiosity had not been awakened in the first place by the story Enid had told, concerning Esau Jacobs, her hesitating manner of mentioning Helen Brandow, together with her greeting when they came together in the cavern, perhaps Harper might not have seen anything beyond the ordinary in this greeting. As it was, he scented a mystery, and made a mental note for futuro reference.

Topsy Todd came up and quietly expressed his thanks, after almost forcing Harper to tell how he had kept him from toppling to the ground when knocked senseless by that falling limb, and how he had contrived to check that first runaway attempt.

"Two was saved, but—waal, mebbe I hadn't ought to say it, but ary one o' the two wheelers that was killed, was wu'th my ole body, ten times over!" sighed the driver, slouching heavily away.

Grip-sack Sid was forced to give an outline of their adventures before the rescuing party would consent to let him off, but he cut it as short as possible. He had a good excuse in Fred Meyers, whose haggard face betrayed how seriously he was suffering, now reaction followed that intoxicating excitement.

Until a litter was shaped and the injured man snugly placed upon it, strong hands lifting him and setting forth on the long journey to Rocky Comfort, following the stage road, now free from fire and cooled off enough for tramping over, Sidney Harper contrived to fight shy of Anthony Porter and Enid.

He knew that he must submit to hearty thanks from the father, for all he had done for the daughter, but he preferred to postpone them until fewer eyes and ears were taking note.

"You really owe me nothing, dear sir," he said, when that meeting could no longer be avoided without open rudeness. "I was working for myself, and while I may have took a few extra pains because my enforced companion was a lady, I neither wish nor deserve more than a simple 'thank you.'"

"It's all I feel able to give you just now, dear sir," buskily said Porter, tears in his eyes and powerful emotion causing his haggard face to quiver as their hands closed in firm pressure. "I have suffered so much, forced to stand idle through all the night—longer than any one year of all my life, before!"

"Not another word, unless you want me to take to my heels and run for a hole, like a scared rabbit!" laughed Harper, dropping those fingers, nodding to Enid with a bright smile, then hurrying off to the side of the litter in which Fred Meyers was being borne along.

But it was his forethought which gave the hint that quickly led the rescuing party to shape other litters, in which Enid, Helen, and even Anthony Porter were placed, gay talk, gayer laughter and no end of merry jests flying about as the imposing procession wound along the stage road. And if Grip-sack Sid hadn't ferociously sworn he'd lift the roof off the first man to insist on such an idea, he would have been fitted with just such another conveyance, and borne at their head in triumph.

After this fashion, with plenty of strong and willing arms to relieve the bearers, fairly quick time was made to Rocky Comfort, despite the numerous obstacles which that flood of flames had cast into the road.

"Which we knowed it'd be pritty nigh that way," explained Topsy Todd, who stuck close to the man whose ready hand had saved his life. "An' that was why we-all come foot-back, 'stead o' haulin' out on wheels."

When the level was gained, and Rocky Comfort sighted, all save Fred Meyers insisted on deserting the litters, Enid improvising a vail out of her father's handkerchief as she saw they were likely to meet with a regular ovation from the interested population.

Grip-sack Sid kept pretty well to the rear as the party drew near Sweet Home Hotel, but Helen Brandow sought him out, saying swiftly:

"I haven't thanked you yet. I can't just now. But—promise that you will give me an opportunity! You will? Please do!"

"Since you wish it, yes," bowed Harper, adding with a low laugh: "I have heard so much about Esau Jacobs, that I'd like to be one of—"

"Helen! my wife—and here?" cried a sharp, clear voice, as a man came rushing out of the Sweet Home to meet the party.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW ACTOR ON THE SCENE.

THE Porters, father and daughter, were in the act of ascending the short flight of steps which, after the fashion of Western hotels, led to the front entrance of the Sweet Home, but not the slightest notice was paid them by the author of that sharp cry as he crossed the roofed porch and sprang down the broad steps.

One arm brushed against Enid as he passed, but he did not give her shrinking form a glance. His eyes, sparkling vividly, were fixed upon Helen Brandow, toward whom his hands were reaching, as though eager to prove by touch that his other senses had not played him false.

Grip-sack Sid instantly drew back and a little to one side as that cry came to them, and after one swift glance toward the hotel, his eyes seemed to find more matter of interest in the woman than the man.

He had felt something akin to a galvanic shock thrill her nerves at sound of that voice, swiftly as her hands had dropped his, turning in that direction. He saw the rich color die away from her face, and a look—he had not time to fully identify it, but surely that was not the love-light which should find birth in an unexpected meeting between husband and wife?

"Helen! to see you here!" cried the man, as his swift strides brought him to her side, his arms closing about and drawing her form to his breast.

If he gave thought to the many eyes watching that meeting, he gave no heed to their curiosity. His face met hers, and there was an audible smack, loud enough and hearty enough to satisfy the most exacting.

"Don't—remember where we are, Mr. Brandow!" said Helen, freeing herself with an evident effort, flashing a quick glance around, her beautiful face showing no lack of color just then.

"If I can," with a short laugh, as he imitated her glance, pausing for a barely perceptible period on the face of Sidney Harper. "But I find it hard to remember anything beyond the astounding fact—it is you, lady-bird? When did you start? How did you come? By what marvelous chance do I—"

"I'll explain all when we're alone together, Felix," curtly interposed Helen, moving toward the hotel where the Porters, father and daughter, had paused on the top step to watch that meeting between husband and wife.

It might have bothered him to explain precisely why, but Grip-sack Sid felt remarkably interested in that meeting, himself. Possibly not another witness there saw anything more than a happy greeting between a happy couple.

"Another screw loose, or I'm a liar!" mentally decided the Get-there Sharp. "Either his tongue or his face is lying, and I'd hate to lay odds that either is giving forth pure, undiluted Gospel. Is he playing for her, alone, or for the crowd in general?"

As a rule, Sidney Harper wanted solid reasons for his decisions, but on occasion he could trust to native instinct. Curiously enough he took a strong dislike to Felix Brandow, as much as he had to Helen, his wife, at their first meeting. And yet, both faces were gifted with far more than ordinary attractions.

Felix Brandow was tall, of graceful yet athletic build, his figure well set off by the neatly-fitting business suit he wore.

A good judge would have placed his age near the middle thirties, and that would have come close enough to the truth, though Brandow was something older than he seemed.

His head was a fine one, well-shaped and balanced. His features were lacking in regularity just enough to gain in strength what they lost in beauty, leaving him a handsome man, as the term goes.

His black hair was trimmed pretty closely, but his well-shaped skull could stand so much exposure. A trimly-kept pair of mustaches shaded his mouth, their jetty blackness forming a sharp contrast with the red of his lips, the whiteness of his teeth, and the general pallor of his skin.

That was the weakest point of his good looks. His complexion seemed too fair for the rest. It gave him the seeming of a closely confined student, or—

"Wonder if my gentleman could give me any hints on prison rules and regulations?" flashed across the busy brain of the Get-there Sharp.

He was slowly moving toward the hotel steps while watching husband and wife as they left him behind. Helen paused at the top step for an instant or two, apparently saying something to Anthony Porter: possibly giving him a brief introduction to her husband, for as she passed on through the open doorway, Felix Brandow tipped

his hat with one hand, bending his athletic form as he extended the other member.

Anthony Porter bowed stiffly. Harper smiled grimly as he involuntarily caught himself listening for the creaking of a rusty hinge!

That was all he saw of the meeting, however, for Enid, improving the opportunity, came flying down the steps to meet Harper at their foot.

"I couldn't go without—I haven't even begun to express my gratitude, as yet!" she murmured, pressing the hand she caught between hers, emotional tears making her blue eyes glisten brightly as they lifted to his face.

"I thought we'd settled all that, Miss Porter," said Harper, in low tones, flashing a glance up the low flight of steps, just in time to cross a look shot that way by the eyes of Felix Brandow.

"You would not listen to my thanks then—you will not listen now! And yet—I must convince you that I am not a shameful ingrate. I owe you my life—I owe you a thousand-fold more! Only for you, my father would have perished, too!"

"You give me entirely too much credit, sister Enid," name and title coming too softly for other ears than hers to catch either. "But if you really wish to repay me—"

"If I can you doubt it, brother Sidney?"

"Not when you use that title," with a bright, glad smile. "Then do me a favor without stopping to ask or even think why. Beg your father to let me form one of the company when this mysterious Esau Jacobs comes to take up his tickets; will you?"

"Enid—daughter!"

"I promise—you shall!" whispered Enid, then hastening back to the side of her parent.

As Grip-sack Sid followed her graceful figure with his eyes, they passed further along to take closer note of a strong contrast: two faces showing in the frame provided by the open door.

The highest and rearmost belonged to Helen Brandow, looking more than ordinarily beautiful just then, possibly because of the foil presented in the other; that of Owen Potter, landlord of the Sweet Home.

He was smiling blandly and broadly, but that could hardly have thrown the bones of his lower face out of place, so nature must have given him that curiously shapen head and face.

To say that his head was pear-shaped, will hardly answer; it was even worse than that. His skull formed a ridge, not unlike the roof of a house, when viewed from in front. His forehead, sloping back as well, came very near to being a triangle in shape. His little eyes were planted deeply under shaggy brows, which formed a contrast to his almost entirely bald skull. His nose was scarcely more than an apology, lying close to his face, which grew broader as its base was neared. His mouth was enormous, his chin immense, his neck but a fiction so far as length goes, but broad enough to make ample amends. His body was large, his arms and legs short and puffy.

And yet despite all this, which almost conjures up a monster of ungainly ugliness when one views it in cold type, Owen Potter was far from being such, when one once saw his smile and heard his voice. The first was so bland, so genial, so grandfatherly, so to speak, that it took one captive and made one forget that wedge-shaped skull and face in a marvelously short space of time. And what that smile began, that voice quickly completed.

It may have been a trifle husky, thanks to natural impediments, but it was so friendly, so full of human love and charity and all the other kindly qualities, that one could no more resist its fascinating powers at first, than one can resist the delicious laziness which steals over one on a summer's day when work is past and idleness earned.

On this occasion Owen Potter fairly "did himself proud" in his manner of welcoming the guests fate had brought to his door. But much of this was sweetness cast away, since Felix Brandow, taking it upon himself to speak for his strangely met relatives, rather curtly bade the landlord see to having a hearty meal prepared with the least possible delay.

As Grip-sack Sid had already taken care to have Fred Meyers carried to where his injured leg could receive medical attention without further loss of time, he had nothing important to occupy his time, and so he leisurely ascended the steps, crossed the porch and entered the hotel office.

Anthony Porter, Enid, Helen Brandow and her husband, had passed directly through the office to the "parlor," which was to the rear. He caught a glimpse of the party through the communicating door, which had been left ajar, but instead of following after, he turned toward the little railed-off space within which stood a desk, a couple of chairs, an iron safe, and a few minor items of furniture.

Convenient to one standing near the railing, whether inside or out, was a dogs' eared book on a revolving stand, which Grip-sack Sid readily divined must be the hotel register. And, like any other well-regulated guest, the Get-there Sharp hastened to pay his respects to that important piece of furniture.

One hand caught up a stubby pen, but in place

of immediately adding his signature to those which adorned the latest page, Harper swiftly noted them, then turned the leaf to extend his investigations further.

His search did not last long. Popular though the Sweet Home no doubt was, since it boasted of being the best and "toniest" caravansary in Rocky Comfort, each day's record of new guests was brief enough. And there, under date of just one week before, Sidney Harper found what he was looking for.

The name of Esau Jacobs, the mysterious! Grip-sack Sid saw more than that. The name was plainly written, and could not be mistaken for anything but what it was: yet the hand that shaped those letters, most certainly did not write the names which he had viewed on the slip of photograph shown him by Enid Porter. And on the next line was another name: Paul Jackson: written by the same hand which signed the name above.

"Both from Denver, and both under the same date," muttered Harper, as he turned back the leaf and put up the pen, unused. "Wonder if our friend Esau takes such a convenience as a private secretary around with him on his travels? Or—what's the matter with a valet?"

The sound of footsteps caught his ear, and he turned from the register just in time to see Anthony Porter, closely followed by Felix Brandow, coming from the parlor where the ladies were left.

"Good!" ejaculated the elder gentleman, crossing the office with hand extended and face lit up with a grateful smile. "I was afraid you had not come in, or—I must at least try to express my heartfelt gratitude for all you have done for me and mine, dear sir!"

"I thought that was all settled, back in the hills," laughed the man of the grip, but yielding his hand to that ardent clasp. "If I'd known different, be sure I'd have hunted another roof to roost under!"

"But I can't help it, man!" cried Porter, his eyes moistening. "The more I think of it, the less I'm able to control my feelings!"

"And I owe you a mighty debt, too, I believe, sir," smiled Brandow, reaching for Harper's other hand. "You rescued my wife, she tells me, and you surely can't refuse thanks for that great service!"

"I say," with a short laugh, glancing from one face to the other, as he permitted his hands to be shaken vigorously. "Seems to me you are piling it on a bit too thick, but if you really think I deserve a reward for—"

"To the half of my fortune!" impulsively cried Anthony Porter, while Felix Brandow gave a low laugh as he chimed in with:

"Mine's but a trifle beside uncle's, but I follow suit!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

OWEN POTTER TRIES TO EXPLAIN.

His smile broadening, the Get-there Sport glanced from face to face and made no reply for a few moments. Then he said:

"Well, your generosity completely overpowers me, gentlemen, and I'll yield at discretion. If you don't think my figures are placed too high, why—"

"Name your figures, dear sir, and I'll meet them, though it leaves me a beggar!" impulsively exclaimed Porter. "Even then it would seem a wretched price to pay for the life of my darling! Even then I'll remain in your debt, far too deeply ever to win entirely clear!"

Felix Brandow still smiled, but it had become mechanical. His eyes did not back it up, like those of his uncle. And Sidney Harper knew that he was trying his level best to sum up this grimy-faced stranger for what he really was, not for what he seemed on the surface.

"And you'll agree to my terms, both of you?" slowly asked Harper.

"Gladly!" nodded Porter.

"If I can meet them, most assuredly," bowed Brandow.

"And when I name my terms, you'll rest content? You'll not insist on increasing them?" his smile changing to a broad grin as he added: "Good enough, and the bargain's sealed! What I ask is—let me have a fair share of the meal I heard you order a bit ago, Mr. Brandow?"

That gentleman stared, open-eyed, and Anthony Porter started to expostulate. Only to have a finger-tip touch his lips, with the words:

"A bargain is a bargain, and that settles it, gentlemen! I'm to have a square meal, and then our debts are wiped out, for good and all."

"But—I can't—"

"Can't wait? My fix, exactly!" heaving a great sigh as a hand came back to compress his stomach. "I'm sharp-set as a newly-fled mill-saw, and once I see the board spread— Well, if you can still think I've asked too modest a price for my services, when you see what a wide swath my teeth can cut on occasion, then your gratitude passeth all understanding!"

"He means it, Uncle Anthony, so we may as well yield with a good grace," laughed Brandow, that set smile growing more easy. "I'll be a warning to us both not to make blind promises for the future."

"I'll see that Enid is not caught in the same

cunning trap, though," declared Porter, laughing, then passing a hand through Harper's arm and drawing him toward the parlor.

But Grip-sack Sid drew back, making his excuses. He would not entirely shirk that meeting, but he really must wash his hands and face, if he could do little to better his apparel, just then. And so, promising to be on hand when the meal was announced, he contrived to shake the grateful old gentleman off for the time being.

He had not far to go for means of cleansing face and hands. Like the majority of Western hotels, so-called, a wooden sink occupied one corner of the "office," supplied with a wooden bucket of water, in which floated a tin dipper. A tin basin, a bit of brown bar-soap, a roller towel, a brush and comb, both fastened to the wall with small chains, and a small mirror hanging from the wall, completed the "outfit" deemed essential for all such purposes.

And while Grip-sack Sid made thorough and leisurely use of these, his brain was busily at work.

The Porters and the Brandows furnished the staple of his thoughts, but the register came in for a share, nor was Owen Potter entirely neglected. And a grim smile came about his damp lips as he thought of that oddly-shaped head and squat figure.

"A man so marked ought to have been endowed with a perfect soul at birth! One so readily recognized from mere description ought to be the very soul of honor and probity. Unless he was born a fool, he'd never commit a sin big enough to bring him under the ban of the law. Owen don't look like an idiot. Ergo, he's all right!"

Feeling no particular desire to meet Enid Porter, with the keen eyes of her cousin taking notes of that interview, Grip-sack Sid dallied along, killing the time until Owen Potter, with his blindest smile, his sweetest voice, summoned his way-worn guests to table.

Enid made room for Harper by her own plate, but if he saw, he did not heed, taking his place at the end of the long table, where he would not seem to be intruding on the family party, yet where he could view each face without seeming to be thinking of aught save the food before him.

Although the hotel boasted a number of servants, among them two fairly neat "table-girls," Owen Potter seemed so desirous of showing his latest guests full honor, that he dismissed the girls when orders were filled, moving softly about the table, the picture of smiling content and tender solicitude.

For some little time few words were spoken. All of the party seemed hungry, and Felix Brandow alone did much talking.

He volunteered an explanation of his happening to be at the Sweet Home so opportunely, and explained his not having joined the searching party, by their having departed before his arrival.

"I came from Bismarck last," he said. "I thought the cause for my coming to Rocky Comfort was about the strangest thing that could happen a man, but when I saw you—when I realized that uncle, cousin, wife, were among those hapless beings lost in the fire—well, I did manage to rally from the shock, but even yet my nerves are all of a jangle!"

"Did you come here because of a divided photograph, Mr. Brandow?" softly asked Enid, with a faint smile playing about her lips.

"Why, how did you—"

Brandow stopped short, glancing toward Harper, who was busily eating, seemingly lost to all other considerations.

"You need not hesitate, Felix," said his wife, distinctly. "Mr. Harper is a friend. Then, too, I showed him the card I received."

"You received?" echoed Brandow, the picture of amazement. "You surely don't mean to say that—Impossible!"

"I surely did, and so did uncle and cousin, as well," nodded the fair Helen. "We all came here at the request—or command—of Esau Jacobs."

Owen Potter gave a start and uttered a smothered ejaculation at that name, and Felix Brandow turned swiftly, in time to surprise that interested look on his wedge-shaped face.

"What do you know about Esau Jacobs, landlord? Is he here? Is he in the house, right now?"

"Beg pardon—most humbly I beg pardon, sir, and you, ladies," bowed Owen, hand over heart. "I'm covered with shame at having even for a moment—"

"Drop that, will you?" his jetty brows contracting, his voice growing hard and metallic. "Answer my question: is there a person called Esau Jacobs an inmate of this house?"

"Not now, sir."

"Then he has been here? When? How long since?"

"He came here, with his private secretary, I think the younger gentleman was, something like a week ago."

"Then he has gone away? Whither bound?"

Owen Potter shrugged his shoulders and flung out his fat paws after a melodramatic fashion.

"That is more than I can answer, dear sir."

He is gone: of so much I am sure. But how, whither, why—I can't even begin to explain!"

And softly, as though merely to himself, Owen Potter added:

"Don't I wish I knew, though!"

"What's that?" sharply demanded Brandow, catching the words. "Look here, landlord, this is pure business. We came here on purpose to meet a man called Esau Jacobs. We are here on time, as set by himself: am I as right with your appointment, as I surely am with my own, uncle?"

Anthony Porter glanced at Enid, then bowed assent.

"All right, then. You understand, landlord? We're here on time, and fully expected to find Esau Jacobs or his duly accredited representative here, equally prompt. He isn't here, though you say he has been. You say you can't explain how, why or whither he went, then you add, to yourself, that you only wish you did know! Now—why?"

This speech, swiftly though it was delivered, lasted long enough to permit Owen Potter to rally from the slight confusion he had been cast into, and his answer came promptly enough:

"Since you insist, dear sir, I'll explain the best I can, only begging pardon in advance for giving offense in case the gentleman should be of kinship or—"

"Come to the point, if you please!" frowned Brandow.

"Well, he skipped, leaving me to hold the bag!" blurted Potter, like one losing his usual politeness in fright.

"You mean he forgot to pay his bills?"

"Just that, sir," bowed Potter, fingering his pendulous under lip a little nervously. "He owes me for board, for self and secretary."

"He seemed to have come in style," with a short, hard laugh. "A private secretary, eh?"

"So he seemed. I know he did considerable writing for the old gentleman while here, and—"

"Did he write any letters? If so, did you note the addresses?"

Owen Potter shook his head negatively. No, he had seen no addresses, though some letters were written. The private secretary saw to their mailing, himself.

"What sort of a looking fellow was this secretary?" asked Brandow, seemingly unable to pass that point. "Old or young?"

"Young. I put him at about twenty-five, or so. He was pretty near as tall as you are; not quite, though! Wore a full beard of light brown, nearly oat-straw color, in fact. I think his eyes were blue, or gray."

"And what sort of a looking person was his master, Esau Jacobs?"

But there Owen Potter seemed to strike a snag. He could say that Jacobs seemed past middle age, and looked like a man in bad health. He was well dressed, wore some jewelry—"

"Wait a bit, landlord," interrupted Brandow, turning toward Anthony Porter, who sat next on his left hand. "Was Helen right when she hinted that you—and Enid—had part of a photograph, uncle?"

"We have, both of us."

"Would you mind showing them? If what I begin to fancy is true, no doubt we're part way to the bottom of this mix, anyway!"

Without waiting for an answer, Felix Brandow drew a flat leather pocketbook from his breast, opening it and taking therefrom a slip of card-board which he placed on the table in front of Mr. Porter.

"You see my invitation card, uncle," with a little laugh, as he turned the slip over, revealing words written on the white back of it.

"Plain as print, I'll say so much for the writer! Now—Helen?"

"What is it?"

"Show up your credentials, please! If they all match, we'll surely have enough to quicken the sluggish memory of our worthy host, yonder! Come! let's learn what we can, while we can."

Mrs. Brandow glanced at her relatives, and seeing them in the act of complying with that impatient request, she likewise brought forth her slip of the photograph.

Brandow was flushed and his eyes glowing as he matched the slips, while Anthony Porter seemed hardly less excited. Were his hopes to be confirmed? Was he about to find a positive clew to his long-lost brother, Lionel Porter?

Despite the fact that the four slips fitted well together, the elder gentleman gave an exclamation of disappointment. If the card was justly proportioned, only a single slip was lacking to complete the photograph, but that slip must contain the head!

"Look and see if you can recognize the body, landlord!" cried Brandow, giving room for Owen Potter to bend over the table.

"It's Esau Jacobs, I'll take my oath! I can swear to that diamond-pin in his shirt-front!" positively declared the landlord, bumping against the Get-there Sharp as he drew back.

"Fine looking fellow, far as he goes," coolly uttered Harper, smiling into Brandow's face in return for his scowl. "Beg pardon if I'm intruding, but I couldn't help hearing your talk, you know!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT WILL THE MORROW BRING?

"THERE is no apology needed, Mr. Harper," quickly spoke up Enid Porter. "If you are not exactly one of the family, 'tis because you are too proud and too modest to admit our claims."

"Right, Enid," and her father nodded his approval. "I only wish we dared ask our friend to help solve this mystery."

"Uncle Anthony, don't you reckon—"

"Rest easy, my dear sir," bowed Harper, with a soft laugh as his keen eyes brushed past that darkening face. "A very little curiosity goes a long ways with me, and as I fail to see here what I anxiously hoped to see, I'll go back to my mutton. Or—is it bacon?"

"Is it too much to ask just what you so anxiously expected to see, Mr. Harper?"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Brandow. I didn't know but what this Esau of yours was the Original Jacobs, and—"

"Serves you rightly, Felix!" laughed his wife, evidently enjoying that bland rebuff far more than did her worthy spouse.

Brandow turned sharply toward Owen Potter, whose odd-shaped face instantly grew grave as that of a professional mute.

"Anything wanting, dear sir?" he purred, softly, inclining an ear toward his hot-tempered guest.

"You are positive that this patched-up photograph resembles the gentleman who stopped here last week?"

"As much as possible, not to have the head and face to go by, sir."

"Was there anything peculiar about the face? I mean anything in features, cut of hair, or that sort?"

Owen Potter slowly shook his head.

"It was just an ordinary sort of face, so to speak, sir. The gentleman wore a fine beard, dark brown, mixed with gray. Otherwise—"

"Yet you jumped at the chance to identify his body!"

"Because it was so like, sir. And then—I took particular note of that diamond pin. I never saw finer stones, sir, and I thought that—well," with a slightly embarrassed cough behind a fat hand; "it's a little way we landlords have, I reckon."

"That you could take collateral, if cash should fail; just so! I know your tribe, landlord, and can guess the rest. Now—just keep your eyes open, will you? And when the original of this photograph puts in an appearance—bringing the right head with him, you understand?"

"I'll let you know of his arrival?" hesitated Potter.

"Precisely! And now, Helen, if you're not too awfully sleepy, I'd like to hear something more about your trip, and how our good friend Harper placed us under such a mighty debt of gratitude."

"Steady, Mr. Brandow!" cut in Grip-sack Sid, who had returned to his seat at the end of the table after securing a fair look at the pieced photograph. "About four more mouthfuls and your debt is wiped out. A bargain is a bargain, and ours was a perfectly square deal."

"If snap-judgment can be called square. Never mind: I'm far too bappy just now to quarrel, but I'll try to see you later. Of course you intend putting up at the Sweet Home?"

"Unless something happens to prevent, yes. Don't let me detain you. I know how nearly worn out the ladies must be, by my own feelings."

Enid passed by his seat, one hand gently touching his arm as she moved toward the window looking out upon the street. And Grip-sack Sid, readily interpreting that touch, was not long in ending his meal.

"I couldn't bear to go away without at least one word with my—brother," a bright flush stealing into her face as she glanced past those broad shoulders, to see both Helen and Felix looking that way.

"Just what I was hoping for," quickly whispered Harper, slightly shifting his position, thereby hiding her face for the moment from those curious eyes. "A word of warning: don't trust either of them too far! Keep close to your father, and be sure he makes no decided move without seeing his way perfectly clear. Then—try and manage it so I can be here when Esau Jacobs puts in an appearance."

"I will. Father can refuse me nothing, and I—I can refuse you nothing, after all you have done for me!"

"Don't—keep cool, please. Let this be our secret, and—you are entirely too kind, Miss Porter," his tones changing smoothly, as he drew back a trifle, his keen ears warning him of an approach. "Once more, I assure you I have been paid ten-fold for all I was lucky enough to do for you last night."

"If all creditors were so magnanimous, dear Mr. Harper, this would be a truly delightful world to live in!" cried Helen Brandow, her warm, shapely hand dropping on an arm as he turned partly around. "You will not accept our thanks, and Mr. Brandow tells me you

positively reject any more material reward. And I am to remain in your debt for all time?"

"You, too?" cried Harper, in mock despair, as Anthony Porter drew near the little group thus formed. "Not a word more, unless you want to see me turn acrobat, and mine best lose a window! I can't stand it, I beg to remark, and—have mercy, I pray!"

Enid gave him a hand, which he was not too timid to press warmly, and then she drew her father away, simply adding:

"We shall see you again, of course, Mr. Harper? You need sleep and quiet, even more than the rest of us—and that is badly enough!"

"You have promised me an interview, dear friend," said Helen, her rich tones softening almost to a whisper.

"I'll dream of it from now until to-morrow, Mrs. Brandow," bowed the Get-there Sharp, slipping in a word as quickly as possible. "You need rest as much as your cousin, so I'll not keep you longer up. And, if I make no mistake, your husband is beginning to grow a bit impatient, waiting for that explanation I heard him beg, just now."

"My husband can wait."

"Not on my account, I beg, ma'am," backing away, then beating a retreat to the office where Owen Potter was perched on a stool at his desk. "Do you always set up such a glorious spread, landlord? Or was this an extra occasion?"

"You flatter me, dear sir," bowed Potter, slipping from the stool as though that formed part of the ceremony. "Mr. Brandow rushed us so that we really couldn't do ourselves anything like justice, but—a pen? Yes sir! My own—hope 'twill suit your hand, sir! More than proud to have your autograph on our books, my very dear sir!"

"Even after holding the bag for others, so lately?" laughed the Get-there Sharp, ending his signature with a bold flourish as though desirous of calling particular attention to the name. "Well, here's hoping you'll fare better in my case, but if I shouldn't come back—it's barely possible that my business will keep me out late, if not all night—don't be too hasty about scratching out my name."

"You wish a room, of course, sir?"

"Unless you prefer my sleeping under the dining-table," as he turned away from the railing.

Grip-sack Sid moved briskly until he was fairly clear of the hotel, for he had no wish to meet with further interception, just then.

For one thing, he was beginning to feel wretchedly weary, and the headache born of that nauseating coal-gas was threatening to return.

"I've got to have a good sleep, or I'll find myself all knocked up, just when I want to be at my best," he told himself, turning around the first corner he came to.

This was his first visit to Rocky Comfort, but past experience in similar towns proved good enough guide to go by. The place itself, though up to the average of the latter-day towns which depend mainly on adjacent mines for support, was of no considerable size, and an old hand like the Get-there Sharp did not need help to find another hotel, where his present needs could be supplied.

He had his reasons for not "putting up" at the Sweet Home, and had registered simply to avert curiosity as much as possible. If those reasons should prove unfounded, or should be removed, nothing would be easier than to explain away his temporary absence.

"If I was in ordinary fettle, 'twould be another matter," he yawned, after turning the key and slipping the bolt on the inner side of the little chamber assigned him at the Blossom House. "But just now, I've got to sleep, and sleep all over!"

He was thoroughly in earnest when he made that remark to himself, and lost little time in removing his clothes for a brief sponge bath, lacking more thorough means of refreshing and cleansing himself. And when he tumbled into bed, it was with the firm intention of falling asleep without delay.

But man proposes, and sometimes fails to receive what he woos. It was so on this occasion. Despite his efforts to the contrary, Harper kept thinking of what had taken place at the hotel, and wondering what change the morrow would bring forth.

"There's a mighty ugly rat in the meal-chest, and I know it!" his thoughts ran. "Who is this Esau Jacobs? If really the long-lost brother and uncle, it would be queer enough, yet one might swallow it for gospel, without quite choking. And yet—if genuine, why isn't he here to meet his relatives? If important business took him away, why didn't he leave some word of explanation? Or—was Owen Potter lying when he declared the mysterious guest skipped mum-chance?"

Time and again his thoughts came back to that point. The looks of the landlord were enough to create a prejudice against him at first sight, and his oily, smirking, soft-soaping manner only increased the dislike in a frank, honest critic.

"Then, too, roughly as Felix Brandow talked to Owen, wasn't it partly counterfeit? If so,

are they playing in cahoots? To what end? Can they have set up a job on Porter? Is it merely a fleecing scheme, or have they still worse in view? And—Enid!"

Right there, if he only knew it, Harper might have found the real reason for that strangely unquiet state of brain.

He had spoken no more than the simple truth when he told Enid Porter that he was a husband and a father. He had a wife and two children, twins. He loved them all, as only a strong, honest, manly man can love those dependent on him. And in the strong affection which he now felt for Enid Porter, there was not a breath of infidelity to his wife.

He had been strongly attracted to the young lady at first sight, before taking the stage at Probability for Rocky Comfort; but if only an ordinary, every-day trip had been before them, no doubt he would have set about the business which brought him to that region, with no more than a passing thought concerning her.

Other people had fallen under deep obligations to him, in the course of a good many years of adventurous life. More than one owed life to his skill or nerve. For some he retained a strong friendship, but never another whom fate had called upon him to fight for, had made such a strong impression as Enid Porter.

"She's good as they make 'em, on earth! Yet—Helen Brandow has no particular love for the little lady. Why? And Felix Brandow is in the same box, if not still deeper! Once more, why?"

That was another puzzle to be solved by future events. Indeed, as his busy brain kept turning over all he had seen and heard, of late, Grip-sack Sid began to grow bewildered; a sure sign that both brain and body sorely needed rest.

"He sung out as though Helen B. was the last person on earth he expected to meet in Rocky Comfort, but—was he so terribly dumfounded? If so, what meant those looks I saw passing from eye to eye? If Helen expected to meet Felix here, why didn't she mention that fact while telling us her little story? And if he was not expected, why didn't she betray just a little more surprise and a little less anger when he sung out to cut her thanks short?"

"If I was a fop, I'd hint at jealousy on his part, flirtation on hers, but that's too thin! Steady, pard! Your brain is running riot, and you want to quit before you make me blush. Hark back to my game!"

"It's a dead sure thing! *He's my man*, to a moral certainty! Then comes the question: shall I clap the nippers on at once, or wait to see what this new lead pans out? Shall I—Go to sleep, you idiot!"

And giving himself a hearty shake, Grip-sack Sid shut his eyes, doggedly resolved to "get there!" if all sleep had not been abolished.

CHAPTER XX.

GRIP-SACK SID GIVES A GUESS.

THAT determination conquered his restless brain, and Sidney Harper slept like a log until some little time after dusk, rising and going down stairs just in time for supper.

This he disposed of with good grace, feeling greatly refreshed by his sleep, and with all traces of headache banished.

Learning from the landlord where he might find a fairly decent stock of ready made clothing, he sought out the place, and fortunately succeeded in finding a suit that fitted fairly well. He shifted his clothing back in a curtained recess where the proprietor slept, and leaving his old garments to be wrapped up and returned to the hotel, he set forth on a trip of observation.

"I'll drop in on Fred Meyers, and see how the poor fellow is flourishing, but first to have a squint at matters around Sweet Home!"

That seemed almost a matter of course. Though rest had steadied his nerves and cleared his brain, sleep had not banished those ugly fancies; rather strengthened his belief that peril of some sort menaced both Enid and her father.

"Is Owen Potter in the game, or was he playing a straight hand? No, as to the last! He's a liar, born and bred! And with Felix Brandow, there's a pair of 'em! All right, my coveys! Both sides can't come out on top, and I'm betting I'll get there!"

A surprise awaited Grip-sack Sid when he came in sight of the hotel where his newly made friends had put up. A stage was in readiness to start, and as he looked, Harper recognized Felix Brandow in the tail, lithe figure passing under the big lamp hanging over the hotel door. And running down the steps, Brandow entered the stage, which immediately rattled away up the street.

"Did any one get in ahead of him? Was his wife along? Did—but that's out of the question!" answering his query before it could fairly shape itself. "Even if the old gentleman would, Enid wouldn't pull out on such short notice, without letting me know whither bound!"

Owen Potter was standing in the doorway, and gave his blandest smile to the Get-there Sharp as he ran lightly up the low steps.

"If you had come but a moment earlier, my dear sir! As it is Mr. Brandow left his regrets, and begged me to add that he hoped to meet you on his return."

"Then it was him I caught a glimpse of, just now? Was Topsy Todd on the box, or hasn't the Probability stage been put back on, as yet?"

"No, sir," bowing and backing away to afford free entrance. "Mr. Brandow took the Turtle Rock stage. Business of importance, he said, but didn't volunteer any further information, so far as the house is concerned. Possibly the ladies—"

"Not on my account," hastily interposed Harper, checking the fellow as he turned away toward the flight of stairs leading to the upper story. "I simply dropped in to ask if I could be of any service to any of their party. They are still sleeping?"

Before Owen Potter could make reply, a well-built young fellow came swiftly up the steps, muttering an apology as he passed them by, whirling the register around to win a fair look at the written page.

A smothered exclamation broke through his lips as he saw the names last registered, and he was turning toward the landlord, no doubt to ask some question of the moment, when a low, yet eager cry came from the parlor, through the opening door of which now showed the fair face of Enid Porter.

"Enid—at last!"

"Maurice—Mr. Henley!"

The young man sprang forward, and the maiden retreated. The door closed behind them, leaving Harper deeply interested, and Owen Potter staring with open mouth.

Before either man found words to use, the door opened again, and Enid, her face blushing divinely, looked forth, calling timidly:

"Mr. Harper, are you at liberty for a moment? If so, please come here."

"At your service, Miss Porter, of course!"

As he passed into the room, Grip-sack Sid closed the door, then nodded toward the further end of the room, muttering by way of excuse:

"Our host is little short of a cherubin, of course, but—he's got ears a full yard long! Not that we have any secrets to discuss, to be sure, but I do love to cheat eavesdroppers!"

Timidly, blushing in a manner that at once revealed her sweet secret, Enid introduced the men: Maurice Henley and Sidney Harper.

"He is my friend—he saved my life, only last night!" she murmured, dividing her sentence between the two men. "You are both my very dear friends, and—please be good friends to each other, for my sake!"

"For his own, if he'll permit me," smiled Harper, satisfied with that one keen gaze, reaching out a hand which was warmly grasped. "And as I'm entirely too modest to sing my own merits, Miss Enid, will you permit me to examine yonder rare engraving while you give Mr. Henley the information his eyes are asking?"

Without waiting for a reply, Grip-sack Sid drew apart, gazing placidly at the coarsely executed engraving on the wall, his back honestly turned upon the lovers.

For such the young couple were, he felt convinced. And, he told himself, if he was forced to give a guess, this would turn out to be still another case of love all ruffled.

"If not, why do they both look so scared? Why is she so anxious for me to vow friendship with the young fellow? To help win over stern parient, I'm guessing for a big round dollar!"

And yet, for lovers just reunited, that interview proved to be a marvelously brief one. Enid called to Harper, and as he turned, she said:

"We have heard nothing of Esau Jacobs, as yet, dear friend, and as it is after dark, I hardly think there is any chance of his coming to-night. If he should, I will be sure to let you know. Papa understands, for I told him everything before we lay down to rest-up."

"You are only too kind, Miss Enid," bowing over her little hand until his lips brushed its velvety back. "I've registered here, as a partial blind for Owen Potter, but I'm stopping at the Blossom House."

"My hotel!" exclaimed Henley.

"Good enough!" with a smiling nod. "I'll be apt to see you again, then. Good-evening, Miss Enid. Glad to see you looking so nicely after our little adventure in the hills!"

He beat a hasty retreat, no less to permit the lovers to have a little longer talk than to avoid the thanks which he knew were rising to her grateful lips. Buying a few cigars of Potter (to throw them away a minute later, as too vile for safe smoking) as an excuse for his call, he left, after saying:

"I'm afraid business will keep me away for the night, landlord, but you can hold my room for me. If I'm not in by ten, I'll not come before breakfast time."

Once fairly clear of the hotel, the Get-there Sharp heaved a soft sigh, laughing at himself the next moment.

"Get out, you married fraud! What if this is a case of love's young dream? The younger looks like an honest boy, and I'm hoping he'll

not have to take his leave from papa's boot-toe!"

Grip-sack Sid paid Fred Meyers a call, but as he was sleeping soundly, under the influence of an opiate, and as he was reported as doing quite as well as could be expected, he did not delay long. A few pointed inquiries satisfied him that the mountaineer was in good hands, and that he was amply able to pay his way.

"Still, if there's anything that can help easy him along, please let me know when I call again, and I'll see that it's forthcoming. He helped me out of a nasty scrape, and I always try to even-up as I go."

After this call, Grip-sack Sid, once more looking the spruce, all-alive drummer, wandered through the town, seemingly without any particular end in view, yet hardly passing a person without giving them a keen look which served as well as a duller man's careful inspection.

He entered a number of saloons, in one or two of which faro was being dealt, or a sweat-cloth in operation, with an occasional game of short-cards where the establishment was too humble to afford a regular lay-out.

At each one of these, as a matter of course, since to do otherwise would have attracted unpleasant notice, he bought a cigar or a drink, watching his opportunity to spill the greater portion of the last.

He seemed looking for some particular person whom he had trouble in finding, for a couple of hours were spent in this fashion, without any visible result.

Through all his wanderings, Harper kept very quiet, for him, and not once did he sing the virtues of Dewey's Magic Salve, or dilate upon the marvelous glories of "OUR HOUSE." Whatever he wanted, was to be found after an altogether different fashion, it appeared.

At length, while leaning lightly against a bar, glass in hand, a man entered the door, paused a moment, then advanced with a quick ejaculation.

"Hellow, Esau Jacobs, how goes it, pardner?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LONG MAN, NAMED SHORT.

GRIP-SACK SID felt an electric thrill pass through his frame at sound of that name, but outwardly he betrayed no signs of surprise or pleasure, not even turning his head to cast a look toward the speaker.

"Grown hard o' hearin' all at once, hev ye, Esau?" added that voice, and just as Grip-sack Sid lifted the glass toward his lips to empty its contents and thus have a fair excuse for turning away from the bar, a heavy hand dropped upon his left shoulder. "Too mighty thin, Jacobs, an'—waal, I be dug-gun!"

Now really startled, Harper wheeled quickly, facing the new-comer, who started back with an almost ludicrous expression of mingling doubt and belief upon his gaunt visage.

With one keen sweep of his eyes Grip-sack Sid summed the fellow up, taking a mental photograph of his outward man, and giving a shrewd guess as to his mental qualities.

He was tall and gaunt of frame, but it was not the emaciation of ill-health. His huge hands, toil-hardened, his bony wrists, his muscular throat and neck, with the long, bony jaws above them, all told of rugged health and physical toughness.

Only for the habitual stoop which had curved his shoulders, this man would have measured considerably nearer seven than six feet. As it was, he stood a fair head and shoulders above the Get-there Sharp as they confronted each other just then.

"Did you whisper, my dear sir?" blandly queried Harper, flashing a glance around the saloon to make sure there was no mistake.

The tall fellow was staring into his face with an air of growing bewilderment, his lower jaw slowly falling, each second widening that cavity between beard and mustaches.

"Waal, I reckon I did, but—"

"And your remarks were addressed to Esau Jacobs?"

"I could 'a' tuck my solemn davy, but—ef et's a joke, or a game whar you don't want to be knowed, pardner," his voice falling too low for the watchful saloonkeeper to catch his meaning, "jest tip a wink, an' I'll go kick myself out o' doors!"

"Please show me your friend Jacobs, dear sir, and I'll set you down for favorable mention in my will. I've been looking for that very gentleman from one end of Rocky Comfort to the other, and was just in the act of drowning grief at failure by poisoning myself with—another like mine, barkeeper, if you please!"

During this glib speech, the tall man was, if possible, increasing the intensity of his stare, and as Grip-sack Sid slightly altered his position in flinging that order across the bar, those parted jaws came together with a snap, then separated to let pass the words:

"Waal, ef that don't knock me clean west-end-an'-crooked! You're 'nough like Esau fer to be his livin' ghost! An' ef you hed on your baird— I say, pardner," with a half coaxing, half reproachful echo in his tones as one huge hand softly patted Grip-Sack Sid on an arm.

"Sav it freely, my dear sir," smiled the Get-there Sharp.

"You hain't tryin' to run a rig onto the old man, he ye?"

"Not to my knowledge. Do I look so much like your friend, Esau Jacobs, then?"

"Up to right now, I'd 'a' tuck my davy you was him! It was his back I see when I come in; the same turn o' the shoulders, the same big-ness, the same way o' holdin' his head: all my old pard! It made me jump a bit when you turned, fer I'd never see'd Esau 'thout a full baird onto the face o' him; but ef I was called to make a pictur' o' him with a shave' face, I'd make it the very moral o' yours, stranger!"

As though he had forgotten his own features, Grip-sack Sid turned for a square look at his reflection in the mirror back of the bar. But his brain was busier far than his eyes, just then.

If this likeness was so strong, why had not Owen Potter remarked upon it? He was keen enough, and a more than usually close observer. Even an absence of beard ought not to have completely blinded him to that resemblance, especially when Esau Jacobs was so urgently longed for.

The tall man was gazing no less earnestly into the mirror, and once more Grip-sack Sid decided that the fellow was thoroughly sincere in what he said; that mistake had been an honest one.

"Queer—turrible queer!" the long man said, with a deep breath, shaking his grizzled head like one seeking to cast aside all doubts, but finding the task a difficult one. "Never see the match in all my borned days, an' I hain't gone through life with all eyes shet, nuther!"

"Wish I really could be your missing pardner, for your sake, but—help yourself, stranger! At least we can drink to better luck next time!"

"You hain't him, fer you hain't got the face o' a liar, an' ef you was him, no matter what 'pended onto it, Esau couldn't go back on his old pard like this!"

"If he could, his friendship would hardly be worth claiming," nodded Harper, still toying with his glass while waiting for the long man to rally his wits.

"Nur you cain't be his boy, fer he told me he never hed none. An' then you're too old. Billy-be-johammered ef I kin ever begin fer to see through the boggle—so thar!"

A low, mellow laugh greeted this desperate explosion, and Grip-sack Sid offered a suggestion:

"Why not do as I do when I feel that way? Put the knot in soak, and fill up the time by smoothing all kinks out of the rest of the line? Barkeeper, can you carry a bottle of your best, with glasses and a brace of cigars, over to one of those tables?"

When Harper first entered the saloon, there had been two men inside, besides the proprietor. Those two had left, a few moments before this gaunt stranger came in, so that, all things considered, a much worse place for a confidential chat might have been stumbled over.

Without giving the tall man a chance to object, Grip-sack Sid locked arms with him, moving across the sanded floor to one of the two small, round-topped card-tables, where the barkeeper quickly filled the order given him.

"For the good of the house, if not our own welfare, you understand," the Get-there Sharp laughed, softly, as the barkeeper left them for his post of duty. "Of course I'll keep time with your swallow, be that little or big, but what I want most is to talk over this odd affair."

"It gits me—gits me all over!" muttered his companion, that troubled, dazed look still lingering in his face and eyes.

"The resemblance must be truly remarkable, to affect you like this. And to think! I was looking for a man named Esau Jacobs, but never once dreaming I could find his picture in a looking-glass!"

A change came over the gaunt fellow. He leaned his arms upon the table, his great length bringing his head quite close to the one seated opposite. His eyes shone brighter, keener, and seemed bent on taking note of every change, no matter how slight that might be, which his words should bring into that smoothly-shaven countenance.

"Ef you was really Esau Jacobs, the ghost of a hint would send me 'bout my own business, pardner. But sence you stick to it you hain't the man I tuck ye fer—ye do?"

"I do, most decidedly!"

"Then you won't mind ef I ax to take a look at your hand a bit?"

"I never denied my hand to friend or enemy," laughed the Get-there Sharp, extending the named member. "I hardly think you an enemy, or I'd send it out with closed fingers!"

The tall man quietly unfastened the sleeve, pushing all back until he could see the forearm. One keen glance, then he dropped the arm, a long breath of relief preceding the ejaculation:

"That does settle it! You really hain't Esau, you'd hev his scar! An' I'm 'most mighty dug-gun glad of it, too! It'd cut me powerful deep to know my best fri'nd hed gone back onto me like that!"

"Then you'll believe me when I say that I'm Sidney Harper, and of no relation whatever to Esau Jacobs?" smiled the Get-there Sharp.

"Jest as sure as that I'm name Simon Short! But—it's lucky Esau hain't a boss-thief, pardner, or you'd run a mighty resk o' pullin' hemp fer that likeness!"

"Consider me duly grateful, Simon, but—what if I were to hint that your friend, Esau Jacobs, is suspected of being still worse than a horse-thief?"

A hot flush shot into that gaunt visage, and the retort came with grim promptitude:

"I'd say you was a liar, an' clinch in with both fists o' me!"

The sleepy barkeeper gave a start, and mechanically felt for the loaded revolver which he, in common with his ilk, kept ready to hand on a shelf near the cash drawer; but as Grip-sack Sid laughed clearly, yet gently, his fears subsided as quickly.

"Shock for shock, Pard Short, and now suppose we get down to level business? You are sure this Esau Jacobs is your good friend?"

"Never a man hed a better or a truer; but what makes you ask 'bout him? Ef you hain't his fri'nd, you cain't be fri'nd o' mine!"

"I'm more than willing to prove myself his friend, if you can show him worthy. Something has happened of late that gives me a powerful interest in the gentleman, and if he really is as white as you seem to know, then he may need all the friends he can number."

"It's straight goods you're measurin' off, stranger?"

"Straight as a string, all wool and a yard wide, Simon."

"You look honest, an' a man with his face couldn't lie like that! What is it you want me to tell ye?"

"First, in case Esau Jacobs should find himself in sore trouble, he could count on your lendin' him a helping hand?"

"Ef it tuck me straight through hell fire—yes!" with grim decisiveness in face and voice.

"There's no half-way measures about your pan-out, that's positive!" laughed Grip-sack Sid, with a nod of approval.

"Why should thar be? Didn't he come 'long, when I was low down in the blackest mudhole a man kin git up to his neck in? Didn't he lend me a helpin' hand when nobody else keered a cuss what become o' me? You bet he just did! An' more'n that: he stuck by me an' fit fer me ag'inst my own fool' self! He saved me double times over, fer he not only brung back the man-hood I'd flung to the dogs, but he showed me how to win back the respect o' other men fer my own self! He let his own chainces go, the better to favor mine. He threw good luck in my way, an' showed me how to 'prove it from start to finish!"

"A mighty good sort of friend to run across, pardner."

"Didn't I say so? Wasn't I wuss then a beggarly drunkard when he fu'st come my way? An' now—waal, I'm none too good, but I'm not low down enough to tetch p'izen like this!" with a black scowl as he viewed bottle and glasses, as yet untasted. "An' I'm not low 'nough down to set quietly by while a stranger hints lles ag'inst the whitest man ever drew breath!"

"That don't step on my corns, Simon," placidly nodded the Get-there Sharp, with a deft motion emptying his glass on the floor, then barely touching its edge to his lips. "I'm ready to take Esau for a gentleman, on your recommendation."

"But—didn't you say somethin' 'bout his bein' even wuss then a boss-thief?"

"Not exactly, Simon. I said, what if he were suspected of being worse than a horse-thief; quite a difference, as you must admit. For, you observe, I never even hinted that I did the suspectin'."

Simon Short lifted a hand to his chin, tugging irresolutely at his grizzled beard, his little eyes still showing suspicion. Beyond a doubt he was as honest as he was earnest in his defense of his benefactor, but his rather sluggish wits failed to keep pace with that glib tongue.

"To the contrary, judging from your encomiums, I should set Esau down as a good man: a mighty good man, in fact!"

"A mighty good man he is, as I'll hold up ag'inst all the world!" once more flashing out, though his tones were subdued while grimly in earnest. "Now I don't know who you mought be, but if you're buckin' ag'inst Jacobs, you've got to crawl all over me fu'st!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"AS SQUARE AS A DIE!"

"INSTEAD of bucking against Esau Jacobs, if he's the square man you say, I want to lend him a helping hand. I have reason to think he's in trouble, or will be in trouble before—"

"Whar an' how? Tell me that, afore you say ary thing more!"

"Gently, Simon!" with a barely perceptible nod toward the bar. "No need to take outsiders into our secrets, and you're waking Johnny up. Will you trust me enough to take a little walk outside?"

"Ef you won't talk in hyar—yes. I reckon I kin hold my eend level ef you're thinkin' o' playin' me roots!"

"You look like it, Simon," rising to his feet

with an easy laugh. "I'll settle for this truck, and join you on the outside."

Simon Short stalked away, and Grip-sack Sid paid the bill, making some light remark as to the odd fish one sometimes catches in public waters, then leaving the saloon. He saw Simon Short stalking up the street, and promptly followed after, giving a glance back to see if the saloonkeeper felt enough curiosity to watch their movements.

Nothing of the sort happened, however, and as the corner was turned Harper overtook the tall fellow, linking arms as he spoke:

"If you have no particular choice of locations, Simon, suppose we meander yon' way! There's more free air than houses or ears, and if you feel anything like me, you'd rather keep your secrets from becoming general property."

"Anywhere, jest so you show cause fer the hints you let drop back yonder," gruffly spoke the tall fellow.

"If I can't show cause, you may name the penalty and collect it too," laughed the Get-there Sharp, moving rapidly toward the edge of the town, and saying nothing more until he gained a spot retired enough to suit his fancy.

Once there, he briefly but clearly explained why the mention of that name had so deeply interested him, but without too plainly exposing what the Porters might wish kept private. And from the eager manner in which Simon Short drank in those words, Grip-sack Sid had no doubt past offenses were being excused.

"Did you expect to meet Esau Jacobs here in Rocky Comfort, or were you guided only by my resemblance in figure to your friend?" he asked, without giving the tall fellow time to strike another line.

"No, I hedn't any cause fer thinkin' Esau was hyar," admitted Short. "I jest happened in thar, an' when I ketched sight o' you, I didn't stop to ax why, or how, or—"

"Just so! Well, you know now that Jacobs has been here, and that he has dropped out of sight after an odd fashion. Of course, it's barely possible that Owen Potter was giving us straight goods, but he's got the face of a liar, and with so many points against him, I can't help believe he lived up to his looks."

"Then you really think Esau has got into trouble?"

"I hardly know just what to think," frankly admitted Harper. "If only Esau Jacobs had been concerned, I wouldn't have taken the trouble to even begin thinking; but some of my friends are mixed up in the affair, and I can't get it out of my head that there's mischief meant them, fully as much if not more than to your friend."

"Ef Potter knows, I'll pound the truth out o' him!" growled Short.

"Time enough for that when other means fail. When you chipped, I began to think I'd found the right clew, and I'm not giving up that idea even yet. You say Esau is clean white?"

"He's square as a die, I tell ye, man!"

"And you'd ought to know, if any one, judging from what you've said about his doing you a good turn."

"Not one, but more then I kin count up in a solid week."

"You've known him for—say, how long?"

"Goin' on nine years."

"Plenty long enough to learn a man like a book! Rich, is he?"

Simon Short hesitated, peering through the gloom into the face opposite. Grip-sack Sid readily divined the cause, and quickly added:

"I can hardly blame you for fighting shy, my friend, but you're in the wrong, for all that. I'm bent on doing Esau Jacobs a service, if he is, as I firmly believe, in or about to be in trouble. And, to prove my good faith, I'll let you into a little secret which I'd hardly intrust to the keeping of another soul in Rocky Comfort. Can I trust you?"

"I don't ax it. All I want to be sure of is that you're not meanin' hurt to my best fri'nd."

"As good proof as I can offer, just at present, is the fact that I am a duly sworn officer of the law. I am a detective, come to Rocky Comfort on other business, 'tis true, but none the less determined to prevent a crime, if this case should show that color. Is that enough?"

Like the vast majority of men who have had little or no dealings with men of that profession, Simon Short at once succumbed. Doubtless he felt that this detective had the right to question him as he saw fit, and that to decline answering frankly would be a crime on his part.

And Grip-sack Sid did not spare those questions, little by little gaining information which may be condensed into far less space than a literal transcript would require.

Yes, Esau Jacobs was rich. His property for the most part consisted of mines and mining property, but he had a large amount of money on deposit, subject to check. On this point, Simon Short was positive.

No, to the best of his belief, Esau Jacobs owned no near kindred. He had frequently lamented the fact that, should he die, there was none near and dear to be benefited by his store.

"And he never spoke of living relatives?"

"Never once. An' ef he hed any, I'm pritty sure he'd 'a' let it out to me, some o' the times he got to talkin' so sorter mournful."

No, Esau Jacobs had no nearer or more confidential friend than Simon Short. To Simon he confined his lamentations, his confidence, his melancholy forebodings during those gloomy hours. No, not even to his private secretary did he show such perfect confidence.

"And his secretary: what sort of fellow was he?"

"Smart enough, I reckon, or Esau wouldn't 'a' kept him on. But—I didn't cotton to him! He was too dug-gun slick! All sugar an' soft-sap! I never liked him, an' he knowed as much, too!"

"What sort of looking fellow was he? Dark-haired?"

"Jest the other way, boss! His ha'r was yaller as straw, an' so war his baird, the which was a mighty solid growth to come from sech soft soil, it was!"

In short, the description given by Simon, fairly well matched that to which Grip-sack Sid had listened while at the Sweet Home. His brows knitted as he listened, for—baseless as that suspicion really was, when closely analyzed—he had more than half-believed Felix Brandow had been playing the role of private secretary!

Many more questions were asked and answered before the Get-there Sharp felt satisfied nothing further of importance was to be gleaned from the tall man, and there is no need to give their talk here, since nothing bearing directly on this record was learned.

"Well, it may be all right, after all, pardner," he said, rising to his feet and stretching both arms, with a yawn. "Don't talk to anybody about the case, and we'll both sleep on it. I'm stopping at the Blossom House, by the way. Call there for me in the morning, and if nothing has been heard from Esau Jacobs by that time, we'll see if we can't strike his trail and find out what took him away from Rocky Comfort after such a sudden fashion."

"You kin count solid on my comin', sir," replied Short, adding in hard, grim tones: "An' ef trouble has come to Esau, I'll even up things with all as tuck a hand in it, ef I hev to hire a rijiment to do the butcherin'!"

"And I'll be near enough to keep tally, pardner," laughed the Get-there Sharp, returning that parting grip with interest. "Blossom House, you mind?"

"No fear o' my fergettin'. I'll be thar on time, you bet!"

Sidney Harper showed no particular haste in getting back to his hotel. He had shaken Simon Short off, more to give his busy thoughts free swing, than because he was weary, late though the hour had grown.

Item by item he went over the facts he had extracted from the man whom he had so luckily met, trying hard to fit them into a plausible theory, though hardly with as great success as he could have wished.

Even after gaining his room and lying down, without removing his clothes, Grip-sack Sid kept thinking, pondering, puzzling his brain over that complicated case. He felt morally sure that the fate of Esau Jacobs was intimately entangled with that of the Porters, but just how, or in what exact manner, he could not as yet satisfy himself.

He was still racking his brain over the puzzle when he heard loud shouts coming from the street, and as he sprung from bed, he caught an excited cry from the floor beneath.

"Fire! fire! fire!"

Almost bursting the door open in his haste, Grip-sack Sid plunged down-stairs, through the office and into the street, to hear the cry:

"Fire! Potter's place is all on fire!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

GRIM PREPARATIONS.

ROCKY COMFORT had a good many outlying shanties, taking it all around, and a curious observer might have noticed something a little beyond the ordinary that same night, had his attention been directed toward one of those unpretending shacks, crowded closely against one of the rocky slopes forming an amphitheater in which the mining-town snugly nestled.

A quick-moving figure paused for a glance back in the direction of the town, then sprung forward to drop his knuckles sharply against the closed door.

"Who's there?"

"You'd ought to know, Mark Finn, but if you don't, open up and let your eyesight make you the wiser," rapidly uttered the new-comer, keeping close to the door, glancing backward like one who either suspects a follower, or fears being recognized by some chance passer by.

A sound not unlike the snarl of a sulky beast, then the door of heavy slabs was flung rudely open, a muscular shape falling back to one side as his caller crossed the threshold.

"What's been clawing you against the grain, Mark?" he asked, at the same time closing the door and leaning his back against it while keenly watching the man addressed. "You knew who it was, and knew that I was due. Then what—"

"Then what—that's the very point, Billy Carter!" interrupted Mark Finn, his bullet-shaped head giving a vicious nod.

"Work, of course. Are you all ready? Where's Tom White?"

"He hain't so mighty fur off, Billy Carter," came a gruff voice as the blankets stirred on the rude bunk built against one end of the shanty. "An' when it's made sure thar's work to be did, Tom White'll be thar in plenty time to do his sheer."

A heavy, brutish face showed itself by the dim candlelight, and the gambler turned from it to take another look at Mark Finn. His own face, bruised and discolored by the decidedly rough experience he had passed through before striking the bottom of Little Creek Gulch, took on an uneasy, suspicious expression. This surely was not the manner of reception he had calculated on, and he began to think he might have made his entry just a little more prudently.

"What's got into you two fellows, anyway?"

"Tell him, ole rocks," grunted Tom White.

"I haven't time for fooling, and you ought to know as much," said Carter, with an attempt to bluff his way through. "The goods are wanted for to-night, and if you're counting on a share of the hoodle—"

"Stop at hoodle, Billy Carter!" harshly interrupted Finn, turning with his back to the little fire which burned in the rude fireplace, his feet spread apart, his hairy hands very convenient to the brace of six-shooters held against his hips by the belt under which his thumbs were thrust. "Now—what's all this talk Topsy Todd has been spreading through the camp?"

"To thunder with Topsy Todd!" a hot flush chasing away the pallor which had come over his face at that grim reception. "If you take up all the fool guff he spits out in a day, you'll have a month's hard work cut out for you! What I want is—"

"First, to show a clean pair of hands to your pals, Billy," coldly cut in the muscular member, adding with delightful frankness:

"We've been talking you over a bit, and decided to make you show up. What have you been playing us double for?"

"I haven't even thought of playing you double, Mark."

"Lying won't help you out, Billy Carter," with dogged coldness. "I want straight goods, and you've got to come to Limerick. What made you try to turn that trick on old Porter?"

"Who says I tried to turn a trick?" blustered the gambler, but at the same time visibly flinching from those two pair of stern eyes.

"Your mug does, for one, and Topsy Todd for another. Didn't you nip his weasel, there in Little Crick Gulch?"

"Didn't I give it back when I found he wasn't dead?"

"Topsy says it took a smart smell of powder, though! Anyway, you knew it ought to be fingers off. What's a miserable weasel, alongside the haul we've figured out?"

"Nothing, of course, but—don't rub it in too mighty rough, boys," in a conciliatory tone, as he glanced from face to face. "Put yourself in my place, Mark! I was knocked twenty ways for Sunday! I just knew I was living, and that was all! Then—the leather lay right in my way, and the old man both looked and felt a stiff. If so, the game was n. g. And so—there you have it, pards!"

"It's mighty little we'd either o' us had, I reckon!" grunted Tom White, swinging his legs around and sitting up on the edge of the bunk.

"Your divvy, of course. And I thought half a loaf heap sight better than no bread at all. So—can't you let it drop?"

"If I only knew you really meant to do the square thing, Billy, I'd find it heap sight easier to look over the bungle. But—well, you'd be a fool not to stick to the line you've marked out, of course!"

"It's gospel I'm dealing you, Mark!" earnestly declared Carter.

"Of course it is, since you never played a cross! But let it go at that, since you had to pony up, and Topsy Todd's singing no one's song but yours. Now—what's wanted?"

"The goods, of course. Didn't I say so, first off?"

"That's all right, Billy, you want the goods. We've got 'em, safe enough. But—whether or no you get 'em, depends!"

"Didn't you agree—"

"And we'll keep that agreement, anyway, as sacred as you kept your part of the compact, in Little Crick Gulch. How much better, depends pretty much on yourself, Billy."

"Oh, b'ile it down!" growled Tom White.

"That's solid sense, Billy, so—what do you want the goods for?"

"To help win the big game, of course!"

"How help win it? We've gone it blind up to this, Billy, but any further would prove us fools instead of wise men. It's high time you let us into the whole secret!"

"An' ef let don't come, goods don't go!" grunted Tom White.

Carter glanced from face to face as the men spoke in turn, his own visage anything but pleasant or at ease. He knew these fellows were tough customers, as they had to be for the work on hand, and he knew as well that either of

them would slit his throat without the faintest compunction if they saw a chance of making more by that course than by standing his friend and ally.

"I can't tell you anything more than that the goods are to be used strictly according to agreement, but I swear that you shall know everything to-morrow. Won't that answer?"

"Cross your heart, Carter?"

"If I lie, you can cross it for me with your knife, Tom," forcing a laugh as he spoke.

"How is it, mate?" with a look toward Finn.

"We'll try it a whirl, I reckon," gruffly responded the largest ruffian, moving toward the door. "Bring the tools, Tom. Come, Billy."

Not a little relieved at coming off so cheaply, the gambler gladly bore them company, leaving the now darkened cabin behind them, Mark Finn leading the way through the gloom, still deeper into the hills.

Tom White brought up the rear a prospector's pick and spade over his shoulder, and not a word was spoken by any of the trio until their present destination was reached.

"You're sure you've made no mistake, Finn?" asked Carter, in low tones, hardly as steady as those he customarily used. "This is the right place?"

"I don't make mistakes, Billy. This is the right place. If you have any serious doubts, maybe you'd get shut of them quicker by taking pick or shovel your own sweet self."

"No you don't!" falling back a little precipitately, as Tom White thrust the tools toward him for choice. "I'll do my part, but it don't include turning the goods up. All I wanted was to be sure."

"Then bite your tongue and wait until it's your turn to chip. Open her up, Tommy!" grunted Finn, giving his right foot a scrape as though marking the precise spot for excavation.

Billy Carter gave a little shiver as he heard pick and spade at work, though so guardedly handled that the sounds could hardly have drawn attention from a dozen yards distant.

He knew pretty well what was lying hidden under those stones and lumps of dirt, and knowing so much, he felt almost thankful for the gloom which kept him from seeing too much.

As for the fellows handling the tools, they seemed wholly at ease, working as quickly and as readily in the darkness as other men work under the bright sun. Nor did they seem less at ease when, with scrape and scratching, now making use of their unarmed hands, an ungainly object was uncovered sufficiently to permit its being dragged out from that shallow pit.

"Not high so bad as your imagination paints it, Billy," said Mark Finn, taking note of that backward shrinking. "'Tisn't like it would be back home. Meat just begins to dry up, out here. And if your eyes didn't help, your nose'd hardly think it!"

The speech was pretty blind, but the gambler only too readily interpreted its full meaning. He had come expecting something like this, and thought himself fully armed to play his part. But now—

"I'd give a fistful of yellowboys if the job was jobbed!" he said, in low, husky tones, shrinking from, yet unable to refrain from gazing at that long, muffled object which his two allies were preparing for transportation through the night.

"If it's properly jobbed, we'll all have our fists full, instead of making other rascals rich," grimly chuckled Finn, rising erect and pulling up his trousers, then drawing his belt a hole tighter. "Ready Billy? Time's passing, and we want to get the cards to working in good time!"

"What's the matter with you shouldering it, pardner?"

"What's the matter with you doing your share? I'm doing all I signed to do, and that's enough for a bog! Tom, you'll see to having the other ready, of course?"

"You bet I will!"

"Of course. You're not a shirk, whatever others may be."

"A bit at me, I reckon, Mark?" uttered Carter, with a short, forced laugh, nerving himself for the ugly task on hand. "I don't want to shirk my share, but I thought it would be easier getting clear of all these rocks if you shouldered the stiff. I'll help you with it."

"You'll help me down with it, rather," grimly retorted the rough. "Come! business in a minute! Catch hold, and we'll be moving."

If Billy Carter really was the employer, as their words at the cabin would seem to indicate, he certainly had picked out a very independent set of tools. Mark Finn spoke more like master than slave, and like one feeling the worse than uselessness of further shifting, Billy Carter yielded, stooping and then rising erect with one end of that muffled object between his hands.

"Have all ready against our coming back, Tom," guardedly added Finn, as he raised his end of the muffled burden, then moved away in the direction of the cabin from whence their expedition had started.

It proved to be no light task, so far as Billy Carter was concerned. The weight was considerable, and the way was rough with loose stones and scrubby bushes. There was nothing

better than the starlight, and that afforded precious little assistance, just there and then.

Even before the shanty was reached, Carter was forced to call a halt, and after passing that structure, heading direct for town, he called time for catching fresh breath, despite the sullen growls sent back by Mark Finn, whose muscles seemed tireless.

When the level was fairly reached, however, the work was not so difficult, and a few minutes more sufficed to bring them close to the rear of a square, two-story building, all the windows of which were dark.

"You go help Tom fetch t'other package, Billy, while I care for this," whispered Finn, in guarded but authoritative tones.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BILLY CARTER'S REWARD.

THE gambler raised no objections, though this was not precisely following the programme he had mapped out in advance. Still, he hurried away without demur.

Bearing such a burden through the night was had enough, but squatting there in the dark, keeping lonely guard over such an object, with at least the possibility of being discovered in such ugly work, was even worse.

He found Tom White quietly engaged in smoking a pipe, squatting by the side of a second "package of goods," considerably smaller than the first had been. The hole was refilled, and all suspicious signs obliterated, so far as Carter could see in the gloom.

Then, too, after a brief space of awkward stumbling along that rough way, Tom White shouldered the "package" as being by far the easiest and quickest method of reaching the end. So, all things taken into consideration, Billy Carter was in pretty good spirits when the rear of that darkened building was once more gained.

The first package had vanished, and with it Mark Finn, but the rear door opened in response to the low whistle Tom White ventured, and a dimly seen shape whispered for them to enter.

Billy Carter recognized the hand that gripped his, but said not a word as it led him along through the darkness, up a steep flight of steps by which the second floor was reached.

There the guiding hand dropped his, a low whisper bidding him wait.

Not for long. A fan-shaped light shot into existence, and by it Billy Carter quickly recognized Mark Finn.

"You've got the tools, of course?" came in a soft whisper, to which query he assented, by a nod. "Come, then. Business, now!"

Creeping along without a sound to betray their progress, Mark Finn led the way to a particular door, turning the light fairly upon the key-hole. No directions were given, because Carter himself had outlined all this, and seemed fairly in his natural element once more.

Taking a long, slender pair of steel nippers from his bosom, giving them a careful wiping with an oiled sponge, Carter silently inserted them in the key-hole. A little cautious manipulation served to secure the necessary hold, then a slow, firm twist of his wrist did the job.

With a barely audible click, the key turned, the bolt shot back, and then, under those slender fingers the knob turned to let the door silently swing ajar.

"Good as old wheat!" softly breathed Mark Finn, then tapping the genteel burglar on a shoulder as he added: "Come. I'll show you the other door, and Tom 'll help you do the job up in style!"

"You bet ye!" murmured the worthy named, falling in at the rear as his mates moved noiselessly along the corridor, lighted merely by that slender ray of dim light.

Pausing before another door, Mark Finn once more supplied the necessary light for the work and for the second time that night Billy Carter proved his right to a diploma as a skilled graduate in burglarious arts. Now, as before, the lock was sprung the knob turned, the door pushed ajar, all without making noise enough to disturb even the lightest sleeper that ever pressed a bed.

This time, however, Mark Finn entered the chamber covering the fan of light with a curved palm, standing motionless just within the door for a few seconds. Then, as though convinced all was well, he unmasked the light, casting its yellow rays squarely upon the one bed that room contained.

Lying there, seemingly wrapped in profoundest slumber, lay Anthony Porter, only a sheet covering his body, thanks to the mildness of the weather.

"Careful, man!" hissed Carter, grasping the arm that held that light. "You'll rouse him up with—"

"Never a rouse, Billy," softly chuckled Finn. "It's a mighty good job, as you'll soon see for yourself. Why—look!" and stepping forward, he rudely shook the prostrate figure by a shoulder.

Not a sound, not a stir, once he relaxed his rude grasp. Anthony Porter lay like one already claimed by death!

"A neater job I never saw in all my experi-

ence!" repeated Finn, then turning toward White, he asked: "You've got a glim, mate?"

"Sure!" grunted Tom, producing the mate to the lantern carried by his comrade.

"All right," as a slide permitted the light to make itself visible. "I'll leave you two to finish here, while I do my share. You know just what to do, of course?"

"You bet ye!"

"All right again! Truss the old 'coon up and take him out. Then you keep watch, while Billy comes back to help me through. Understand?"

Tom White did not seem to consider a repetition necessary, but the less cool-nerved gambler muttered an assent. Finn turned and left the chamber, going back to the room first unlocked.

Tom White lost no time in getting down to business, seemingly content to do the heft of the work, an occasional muttered word setting Carter aright when such was needed.

Anthony Porter, though plainly alive, since his breathing could be heard as well as felt, showed no signs of waking while that rude handling was going on. Beyond a doubt he had been heavily drugged, and from his point of view, Mark Finn had been fully justified in pronouncing it an admirable bit of work.

Using a light woollen blanket which lay over the foot of the bed, as the handiest material, Tom White wrapped the unconscious gentleman up, body and head, though not seriously obstructing his respiratory organs, using a thin but strong cord taken from one of his capacious pockets to keep the muffler in place.

This done, he bundled up the garments discarded by Anthony Porter on retiring, tying them to a small valise which rested on a chair at the foot of the bed. Giving these latter articles to Carter, he whispered:

"You hang to them, pardner. He hain't sech a mighty heavy weight but what I kin stagger under him. Now—show a glim 'long the way, so I'll make no slip or trip. Ef we be hev'in' it all to our sweet selves, right now, let a rumpus kick up, an'—waal, thar'd be gay old glory on fire in a holy minnit!"

"Down the way we came, of course," muttered Carter, leaving the chamber in advance, after pausing to listen for a brief space, thus making sure that nothing was going contrary to their hopes and wishes.

Tom White grunted an assent, then moved quickly along after his guide, that unconscious figure slung carelessly across his broad shoulders, seeming no more felt than if it had been a bundle of straw.

Nothing occurred to interrupt their progress, and the steep flight of stairs to the rear of the Sweet Home was descended in safety. Shutting off the light before swinging the rear door open, Billy Carter made a brief reconnaissance, then whispered to White that all was clear.

That sturdy knave carried his burden out of the hotel, dropping it down in dense shadow, then reached out for the bundle which Carter had brought along, muttering:

"I'll watch hyar, as Finn said. You go back an' help him bring down t'other bundle. Step on aigs, an' don't show no more light then you jest hev to, Billy!"

"I'm wide awake, Tommy," chuckled the now re-nerved gambler. "This isn't my initiation, you want to remember, boy!"

With steps as silent as falling snowflakes, though he moved so rapidly, Billy Carter passed up the stairs and along the corridor to the chamber which he had first opened.

Entering this, after gently scratching on the door by way of friendly warning, he saw Mark Finn sitting on the edge of a bed, near its foot. And on that same bed, wrapped up in a blanket, almost precisely after the fashion her father had been muffled by Tom White, lay Enid Porter!

Like him, she was breathing slowly, heavily, fast bound in a drugged slumber. Like him, she was all unconscious of the terrible peril which had come upon her in the dead of night!

"Looks so mighty much like the sleeping beauty, that I've a good mind to play the part of the prince!" muttered the gambler his eyes beginning to glow as they rested upon that lovely face. "Mark, old rocks, can't you oblige by shutting your ears and turning your head, just ten seconds?"

"Quit your guffing, Billy," in a harsh mutter, rising to his feet. "You got the old gent outside, safe and sound?"

"Yes. Tom's standing guard. But," giving a start as he cast a swift glance from bed to floor, then into the face of his companion. "I say, where's the bundle, Finn? One body was to be left here, and—"

"Sure!" at the same time telling Carter with a murderous blow, and then gripping his throat while pressing a long blade to his heart. "A body goes, and yours will just fill the bill!" his hands swiftly stripping the corpse of all articles by which it might be identified.

CHAPTER XXV.

INTO THE FLAMES.

"FIRE! Potter's place is all on fire!"

The man who uttered that excited cry, passed on at top speed, but his words struck Sidney Harper almost like so many stunning blows.

Was there another Potter than Owen in Rocky Comfort, so well known to all that a more definite description than "Potter's place" was unnecessary?

His face turned instinctively toward the north, in which direction he knew the Sweet Home lay from the Blossom House. To catch sight of a dull red glow already tinging the gloom and momentarily growing broader and brighter.

A hoarse, rasping cry rose up in his throat as the ugly truth began to force itself upon his brain. Surely this could not be an accident? Surely the first blow was being dealt his new-found friends by their secret enemies in that, as yet, dimly suspected plot?

The delay was barely perceptible, but one's brain does swift work on such occasions, and Grip-sack Sid had time enough not only to think this, but to register a mental vow of vengeance in case what he began to fear should prove true.

Even had he been ignorant of where Potter's place was located, he would have found it an easy task to reach the scene of action. That wild alarm—never more thrilling than when heard in a shell-built town where no facilities for fighting fire have been provided—had stirred Rocky Comfort from center to circumference even in that short space of time.

Wildly excited men were tearing through the unpaved streets, yelling at the top of their voices, some with buckets, some with tubs, and more than one—in memory of the days when they were liable to be called from the plow to fight fire—carrying broom or bag or bit of scrubby brush with which to beat out the flames.

It did not take long for Grip-sack Sid to reach the spot, once he received the alarm, but that first glance caused his heart to rise in his throat most disagreeably.

Either the alarm had been very slow in making itself heard outside the building, or else the flames had begun their dread work with far more than usual greediness.

Already the building seemed wrapped in flames, not only on the ground floor, but upstairs as well.

Fully two score men had collected in front of the doomed building, each one doing his full share of yelling and shouting forth commands, but precious little else. A number of others, cooler headed or less careful of their lives, were working like madmen on the lower floor, tossing furniture out into the street, or tugging at the safe which stood in the office.

All this Grip-sack Sid took in at a glance as he came swiftly up the street, and before his eyes left that redly lighted front, he recognized the half-dressed figure of Owen Potter, rushing to and fro in aimless haste, now flinging up his fat arms, now tearing at his bald skull for the hair which had long since deserted it, now stopping short to stare at the devouring flames like one petrified with despair.

"Open up, here!" cried the Get-there Sharp, an outward sweep of his strong arms clearing for himself a passage through that close, swaying cordon. "Fall to work if you're men! Are all safe—all out?"

If any clear answer was given this question, Grip-sack Sid failed to hear it. He ran through the cordon, dashing up the steps and leaping across the wide portico, stopping barely in time to keep from knocking Owen Potter headlong.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!"

Even when Harper gripped an arm with fierce power, Owen Potter kept up that explosive moan. His wits seemed shattered by the heavy blow fate was dealing him. He stopped short in his blind march, because that strong arm would not be resisted, but his bare feet maintained their motion: lifting and falling like one still walking.

"Are they all safe—all out, you fool?" thundered the Get-there Sharp, giving Potter a shake that caused his flabby cheeks to flutter.

"Oh, Lord! I'm ruined! Oh, Lord! I'm ruined!"

Swift as thought Harper slapped Potter on the cheeks, first one and then the other, with a force sufficient to outline his fingers in red. It looked a brutal action, but it seemed productive of good, for the landlord dropped that crazy lament for a howl of pain, and when Harper repeated his question, a coherent answer was ready.

"Yes, I reckon! I called—I raised the alarm and—oh, what a night! I'm ruined! Every dollar I've laid up against old age is—"

With a smothered curse the Get-there Sharp flung Owen Potter from him, fearing to waste precious moments trying to wrest truth from his fear-spelled lips.

He sprung partly down the steps, flashing a keen glance over the rapidly-increasing crowd, looking for faces which he failed to discover.

"Have any ladies left the hotel?" he asked, at the top of his voice. "There were two, at least! Have they escaped?"

Some said yes, others said no, and as he failed to see aught of the Porters or Helen Brandow, Grip-sack Sid feared the worst and made one short, fierce appeal to the crowd.

"Help, if you are white men!" he shouted, at the same time feeling for the silk handker-

chief which he habitually carried in his coat. "There's women being roasted, and—for love of humanity, come lend a helping hand!"

Even while shouting forth the last sentence, Grip-sack Sid was rushing back into the office, now full of choking smoke and more than one red flash of fire.

He had not forgotten where the wooden sink and water bucket stood, and reaching the spot, he swiftly saturated his silk handkerchief with water, then formed it into a smoke-guard, or respirator, by tying one edge around his face, just below the eyes, knotting the two upper corners back of his head, leaving the handkerchief to fall below his throat, much as an apron falls from a woman's waist.

Only for taking this precaution, Grip-sack Sid could never have climbed half-way to the second story, so densely was the narrow stairway packed with smoke, so fierce had the heat grown even during that comparatively brief delay.

But past experience had told him, what was now proven again, that so long as the handkerchief retained its moisture, so long might he breathe freely, since not a particle of smoke could be drawn through those damp meshes.

A sharp, almost fierce cry burst from his lips as he gained the second story; a cry meant to awaken those who might still be sleeping, direct those whose wits might be dulled by that suffocating smoke, and at the same time give vent to the almost savage rage that was born of a terrible truth.

Even in those thrilling moments, Sidney Harper was a detective, and he knew now, what he had merely suspected before: that fire was surely incendiary!

"The same old game! Coal-oil, and plenty of it! If—Porter! Oh, Enid Porter! Fire! fire! rouse and out, for your lives!"

Where one less perfectly protected would have strangled and been unable to utter an intelligible word, Grip-sack Sid thundered forth his warning, groping his way along the smoke-filled corridor, always dark, but now a stretch of darkness that could be felt, save when a red flash of coming fire afforded a brief light.

From door to door he rushed, striking each in turn with hand and foot, flinging open those that yielded to his touch, but from not one winning a reply.

And then, his brain beginning to thicken a little as that horrible heat increased, a new fear assailed the Get-there Sharp.

Had Enid already been smothered by the smoke? Had he passed her room by, leaving her to a horrible death, simply because she could not answer his call?

He faltered—sure sign that nature was nearing its limit—at that maddening thought, but before he could turn back, a choking scream came to his ears from—whence?

"Enid! for love of Heaven tell me where to look!" he shouted, trying to make each word more distinct, by lifting the silken shield that had, up to now, protected his lungs.

As he did this, smoke rushed beneath, and his first breath filled his lungs, making him reel and his brain to spin like a top. Yet, despite all that, Grip-sack Sid caught that half-strangled reply:

"Help! here—save me, or—help! I'm dying!"

As much by instinct as reason, Harper leaped forward, striking heavily against a closed door. His hand found the knob, but the barrier refused to yield.

"Enid—sister!" he cried, hoarsely. "Are you in there? Is this the right room?"

"Help!" and he could hear a frantic beating against the other side of the door between them. "I'm burning—choking like—"

"Courage!" he cried, drawing back for a desperate effort. "Back out of the way! I'll break the door down! Are you back?"

He heard a sound—he could not wait to be sure that his warning was fully comprehended. Already the fire was eating its way through the flooring from below, and the loss of a minute now would almost insure the loss of their lives, as well.

Shoulder first he struck the door, breaking the flimsy lock and hurling the barrier wide open. He tumbled into the chamber, tripping over some object, and falling on all fours.

"Enid! where—"

Even while falling that name crossed his lips but his head struck the bed with stunning force, and his call was broken short off. He lay gasping for a brief space, and had only his own life been at stake, it is not so certain that he would have rallied in time to preserve it.

Even as it was, Grip-sack Sid hardly knew what he was doing until his groping hands met a human form, lying on the floor, just where it had fallen when hurled away by that opening door.

"Enid! I'm here—I'll save—or share!" he gasped, speech and strength coming back as he felt that soft flesh.

With a desperate effort he rose to his feet, raising that unconscious form in his arms. He staggered to the door, but paused, with a gasp of horror, as he saw a broad sheet of ruddy

flame cutting off his escape by the way he had entered.

For a single breath he stood appalled, but then, as he felt the woman in his arms give a shiver and heard her gasp, back came his nerve, and with a mighty effort he stilled that drunken whirl in his brain.

Springing back into the chamber, he slammed the door shut in hopes of winning an additional moment or two, then bore his helpless burden across the chamber to where the small window showed dimly through the dense smoke.

One stroke of his foot dashed out both sashes, the glass shivering and falling both inside and out in a heated shower. He leaned through the opening thus made, sending forth a hoarse cry for help.

There was no answer. He looked out on one side of the building, and the crowd was almost entirely confined to the front.

He saw this, and he saw more: saw the red flames springing up from below, having eaten through the boarding half way up to where he stood!

The distance was not very great, but too far for a safe leap with another in his arms. And so, working with desperate swiftness, Harper wrapped his burden up in blankets, head and body, then thrust her through the window, lowering her as far as possible before letting her drop.

Down through those ugly flames she dropped, but he sprung quickly after, snatching the muffled form up and staggering away toward the street, choking, scorching, his garments showing more than one ugly spot of fire as he was caught sight of by that excited crowd.

He hardly heard them, hardly recognized Maurice Henley in the smoke-blackened, fire-scorched shape that staggered toward him, gasping out:

"Enid—my love! Have you saved her?"

"I got—there!" gasped Grip-sack Sid, then falling heavily.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SIMON SHORT BRINGS THE NEWS.

It was broad daylight when Sidney Harper opened his eyes to consciousness, and for a little while he lay without motion, vaguely trying to guess what made him so stiff, so sore, so entirely unlike his usual self.

He knew that he must be in bed, from the feeling, but—why had he overslept himself so long! What was that fellow doing in his room? What did it all mean, anyway?

With a dull, languid anger forcing itself to the surface, he looked more closely at that gaunt figure doubled up in the wooden chair near his bed, then—

"Hellow, Esau Jacobs!"

"Fer the good Lawd!" exploded Simon Short—only he could display such length—leaping to his feet and stretching out two huge paws as if to restrain that rising figure under the sheet. "Don't ye try fer to do it, pardner! Don't ye try fer—"

"Oh, get out!" interrupted Grip-sack Sid, but letting his body drop back, closing his eyes as his brain began whirling dizzily. "What's the matter with you? With me, I'd better say!" ending with a smothered groan, as his lids flew open once more. "Who's been—Glory!"

It all came back to him, then! And with that memory came something of his usual strength and steadiness of nerve.

"I say, Simon, did I get there? Did I bring out the little lady—she wasn't badly hurt?"

"Not the one you fetched wasn't, but—"

Grip-sack Sid lay watching the tall fellow, whose face only too plainly betrayed what his tongue refused to utter. The Sweet Home had not turned to ashes without claiming a human sacrifice!

"Who was it, old man?" slowly asked Harper, closely watching that still grimy face, resolved to learn the whole truth, if not by one method, then by another. "Some one was burned; who was it?"

"You hain't fit fer to talk, pardner," huskily muttered Short. "Ef you was, but you hain't—don't ye see? You come turrible nigh to ketchin' your last sickness, back thar, an' ef you hain't most mighty keerful, why, thar's no tellin'—"

"All right, Simon! If there's no telling—where's my trowsers?"

Grip-sack Sid flung back the sheet and swung his bare legs out of bed. The effort caused his brain to begin whirling again, but he grimly waited, fighting back the sickening sensation.

"Hands off, or I'll slug you!" he sternly grated, as Short tried to ease him back to his pillow. "If you won't tell me, I'm going out to learn the news my own self!"

"I'll tell ye, ef I must, pardner," huskily muttered Simon, yielding to that imperious will. They was lives lost, wuss luck!"

"More than one, then?" muttered Harper, lying down. "Who were they?"

"Waal, I hate most mightily to say it, but—I'm turribly 'feard your friends was amongst the number," faltered Short.

"Not—you don't mean Anthon Porter?"

"He hain't bin see'd sence th fire, pardner."

Nur yit—his gal is gone, too!" desperately blurted forth the very worst.

"You lie!" fiercely panted the Get-there Sharp. "I saved Enid my own self! I had her in my arms when I fell down in front of the hotel!"

"Not her—wuss luck!" with a truly doleful expression on his rugged visage. "A young feller—he's layin' pritty nigh crazy right now, over in 'nother room, hyur—tore off the blankets wropped 'round the woman you fetched, but 'twasn't her: he was huntin' the same gal his own self, ye see! An' she said—"

"Not Enid Porter!" huskily panted Harper. "Surely I didn't make a mistake and take Helen Brandow for Enid?"

"That's the name she give, fer sure, pardner," nodded Short, uneasily. "An' the young feller—Henley's his name, come to think—give a yell o' despair, an' made 'nother break fer the fire. I ketched him. I'd toted him out, once afore, when he was mighty nigh tuckered, ye mind. He fit like a crazy critter, ontel the ruff fell in, then he limpsied down like a wet rag. He's bad burnt, but Doc says he'll git over it ef he don't ketch no backset. An' then—"

"Enough of Henley. Tell the rest, unless you want me to get up and go hunt a full report on my own hook," interposed Harper, his voice so clear, his tones so steady that Simon Short stared open-mouthed.

Grip-sack Sid saw this, and a faint smile came into his scorched face. It was not the first man who had been amazed by the wonderful will and nerve he had been gifted with by nature, and which had been strengthened by a long career of stirring adventure.

No wonder Simon Short was surprised, when even he, himself, felt a touch of the same sentiment.

During those few minutes since learning that he had saved—not the maiden for whom he felt a truly fraternal love, but Helen Brandow, who had inspired him with an almost contrary sentiment at sight—Sidney Harper had suffered as only such strong natures can suffer. If brief, it was a killing fight. And now the victory was won, he was grimly resolved to do nothing that could endanger those dearly-bought fruits.

"You say it was Helen Brandow I brought out of the hotel?"

"That was the name she give, as I'm told, pardner."

"Was she much hurt?"

"Not to say hurt, countin' jest fire," hesitated Short, tugging at his grizzled beard, seemingly searching for the right words to express his meaning. "But thar hed to be a doctor called in—she was tuck in keer by a good woman named Early, ye see; tuck to her house, an' putt to bed."

"What report does the doctor give?"

"Waal, ef I hain't mistuck, the ledly wasn't burnt—you tuck keer o' that! Nur yit breathin' of the smoke didn't come to much harm. But she's jest nat'ally broke all up, 'long o' her skeer, an' her narves, an' the giner'l shakin' up, as ye might say."

"Something like nervous prostration," nodded Harper. "If that's all, she'll git over it in good time. You know where she is located then?"

"Sure! I reckoned you'd want to know, seein' as you'd tuck sech a turrible resk fer to fetch her out alive. Why, pardner, ef you'll let me say it! Thar hain't a man in seventeen States this very day as is more talked up then you bel The bull town—"

"Give the whole town a rest, Simon," coldly interjected Harper. "I don't care a fig for the town. What I want to find out is just how far your budget of news runs. You say young Henley is here?"

"In his room, pritty bad scorched, too! He jumped right in the hot of it, though he was pritty iate gittin' thar! An' ef I hedn't stumbled over him when—"

"You were up-stairs, then? I'd have given a big round dollar to have had you by my side when—but it's too late, now!" forcing under a sigh of bitter regret. "You were there, then?"

"Somebody hed to try," modestly muttered the tall man. "I didn't git much done, fer 'peared like everybody was gone—or gone up! An' so, when I tripped over the young feller, I jest froze on an' toted him out, though he fit all the way wuss'n a wild-cat! An' he kep' callin' to somebody like—"

"I know. He was acquainted with Miss Porter," coldly interposed the Get-there Sharp. "And you say nothing has been heard of 'hem?"

"Not a smitcher—wuss luck!" with a gloomy shake of his head.

"Does anybody pretend to know how the fire started?"

"Not as I knows on. Fu'st anybody knowed, she was all ablaze."

"What does Owen Potter have to say about it?"

"Lard, pardner, you never met up with sech a mixe-up critter in all the days o' your born life! He clean knocked silly! He can't do nothin' starter then to try to pull out the h'ar he hain't st. An' he jest moseys 'round like a fat ghost, likin' to himself an' mournin' over

what-all he's lost. Says he's left a pauper in his old age! Says thar hain't nothin' better left fer him then the poorhouse! An' all sech redicklis stuff like that!"

Simon Short gave a snort of disgust, seemingly thoroughly ashamed of belonging to the same race as Owen Potter.

For some little time Grip-sack Sid lay with closed eyes, yet contriving to keep watch of Simon's face. And what he saw therein led him to resume his questioning.

"Has any search been made for Mr. Porter and his daughter?" he abruptly asked, watching Short closely while awaiting his answer.

"Waal, they've bin looked an' asked fer all over town, but nobody kin give any information. An' so—"

"Has any search of the ruins been made?"

"Not yit, but they was talkin' of doin' it, soon's the coals died down 'nough so's they could git down to it," slowly answered Short.

"All right. Make room, Simon. Where's my trowsers?" and Harper once more rose to his feet, this time firm and steady as of old.

"But you *cain't*, man! You're too bad hurt fer—"

"I'll wrestle you for a dollar, and bet odds I'll get there, too!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SEARCHING THE RUINS.

As though determined to leave no room for further argument on that score Grip-sack Sid caught Simon Short around the body, giving him a swift wrench, then a heave that sent his heels scraping across the low ceiling, ending by dumping the astounded miner on his head in the middle of the bed.

"Not for publication, but as an evidence of good faith, pardner!" laughed the Get-there Sharp, easing down the long lower extremities, not to too severely jeopardize the joints of the bed.

"The—good—land o' liberty!" spluttered Simon, ejecting the last words in a lump, as Harper caught up the pillow and held it menacingly over his face.

"Shall I cushion your cabeza, and use it for a seat while dressing, Simon?" demanded Harper, with a tremendous scowl as he held the pillow poised. "Or do you admit that I'm equal to pulling on my own trowsers without outside assistance?"

"Flag o' truce, critter!" gasped the tall fellow. "I'm satisfied. Ef I wasn't, I'd hev to grunt an' root fer a livin'!"

"All right, pardner," and the Get-there Sharp smiled as sweetly as he had scowled viciously.

"You didn't seem able to appreciate any milder sort of argument, so—there you have it! All sound, of course?"

"Ears chuck full o' sound, anyway!" muttered Simon, forcing a sickly smile as he reared his tall bulk, then compared himself with the sport who had overthrown him so easily. "An' me big a-plenty to swaller ye!"

"And good enough to serve me the same way, if I hadn't taken you off guard," diplomatically amended Harper, getting into his clothes as rapidly as possible. "But you would insist on my being an invalid, and I couldn't stand that, you know! There's work to be done, and if I don't do it myself, I'll never be sure it wasn't botched. See?"

"Kin I be a common rouser to your cap'n?" meekly queried Short, finding it difficult to get over that humiliating downfall.

Grip-sack Sid turned to squarely face the tall fellow, resting a hand on each shoulder and looking him steadily in the eyes. All trace of levity had vanished, and when he spoke, his tones were cold and hard.

"The devil was scorching me up, and I had to let a bit out or do worse, Simon Short. You're a good man. I need help. Will you give it?"

"Show me what to do, pardner, an' I'll do my little best."

"Even if it comes to tough fighting?"

"Even fightin', unless it's ag'inst my best fri'nd, Esau Jacobs."

"Shake! Keep an eye on me, and if you see me jump any one, do your best to hold the crowd back. You understand?"

"Sure, so fur. An' ef they try to rush things, mebbe they'll find it not so mighty easy to double me up. They's only one man hes a license to do that, an' he'll know thar's no need to try."

Simon Short gazed at the Get-there Sharp as though he expected more explicit instructions, but Harper showed no haste to give any. He was putting on his coat, having assured himself that his pistols were in serviceable condition. And then, slinging his grip into its accustomed position, he opened the door and led the way down stairs.

Thanks to a narrow door at the foot of the flight, it was possible to leave the Blossom House without entering the office, which, in this case, was graced by a small bar as well.

Harper took advantage of the door, as he had no desire to parry questions which would almost certainly be offered by some of those whose voices he could hear in the office. They were discussing the fire, as a matter of course.

"Which way, boss?" asked Short, as they struck the street.

"To the ruins, of course. I've got to know the worst, and nothing like securing the news at first hand."

"Ef it don't clean upset ye, though!"

Grip-sack Sid laughed low and cold, the notes giving Simon a disagreeable chill.

"Do I look so puny, my dear fellow? If so, looks lie! I'm ready for whatever turns up, and that covers more ground than you dream of, just now."

It did not take long to reach the spot where Owen Potter's hotel had stood, but where was now only a mass of ashes, coals, charred beams and such portions of frame and furniture as fire could do no worse than distort and ruin.

Although it was nearly noon, little or nothing had as yet been done toward making a systematic search for bodies, mainly because a guiding head had been lacking, though the ruins were still hot enough to promise no little trouble to the workers.

Matters took on a change now. Taking in the situation at a glance, Grip-sack Sid bade Simon Short follow his lead, then at once pressed to the front, calling for volunteers to search for remains of those who had almost certainly lost life in the fire.

More than one recognized the hero who had rescued the lady—the last one to leave the hotel before the roof fell in—and as this fact spread, there was no lack of laborers.

Both Topsy Todd and Dan Gregg were of the crowd, and they at once backed the Get-there Sharp, who quickly had his hands full with directing the workers, without doing actual labor himself.

Little by little the debris was removed, care being taken to make sure *what* was uncovered before going any deeper. And then—a cry announced the gruesome discovery for which all were in a degree prepared.

Only a trunk, bearing little resemblance to what it had been in life, yet to be mistaken for naught else, it was silently moved from the heated spot where found, placed outside the ruins where it would be out of the way, then the search was resumed.

Twice more was this gone through with, and at the third discovery, the excitement of all fairly broke bounds. As yet only two guests had been reported missing: Anthony and Enid Porter. Then—who was the third unfortunate?

More than a score voices asked that question, and the silence which followed, each member waiting for one better informed to offer an answer, was broken by the rapid clatter of a horse's hoofs on the hard, flinty street.

"Make way, there!" cried a hoarse voice, and the rider, hardly waiting to check his foam-flecked steed, leaped to the ground and rushed through the crowd. "Who said—Has my poor wife been found?"

It was Felix Brandow, and as his swiftly roving gaze fell upon those charred remains, he staggered like one dealt a crushing blow.

Grip-sack Sid was not far away, but he increased rather than lessened that distance, his face very pale, his eyes glittering like the brightest of the coals he had so recently been turning over.

"Helen—wife!" hoarsely gasped Brandow, shrinking back as he saw what those gruesome objects really were. "Did she escape? Tell me if she is safe, or—Speak, some of ye!" his tones growing fiercer.

Grip-sack Sid caught the eye of Simon Short, and a nod gave the tall fellow his cue. He acted promptly enough, pushing to Brandow's side and saying:

"Ef your name's Brandow, your wife is safe, stranger."

Felix Brandow stared into that grave face, shrinking slowly back, like one unable to realize spoken words.

"She wasn't hurt, but *all* wasn't so lucky, ye see!" pointing toward the charred bodies.

"Safe—my wife?" gasped Brandow, staggering like one whose overstrained nerves are giving way. "I thought—they told me—"

"Waal, the only ones knowed to be missin' was named Porter, boss," gruffly spoke up a broad-shouldered fellow who had been among the busiest laborers in the ruins.

"Not—no, no! it can't be!" gasped Brandow, springing toward the remains and dropping to his knees, like one seeking proof to the contrary. "There *must* be some mistake! I'll never believe—Why," as he turned a baggard face toward those sympathizing witnesses, "I only left them at dusk, yesterday! I never thought—They're not here! I *can't* believe it!"

Tom White—he of the broad shoulders—held out a flask; and Felix Brandow caught at it greedily, drinking freely, like one who needs artificial support. Then, rising to his feet, still pale as a corpse, but with something of rallying power, he asked a full explanation.

There were no lack of volunteers to tell the tragic story, but Sidney Harper was not one of that number, though he kept shifting his position in order to take note of that face and its changes. The old suspicions had come back with double force, and through all that wild agitation, that shrinking from then defying the

terrible shock, he was searching for some proof of actual guilt.

Only a detective who had grown familiarized with crime in its most repulsive shape, would have entertained such an idea, but Grip-sack Sid fancied he read anger instead of relief in Brandow's face when he was assured of the safety of his wife.

Like one slowly recovering from a soul-crushing shock, Felix Brandow listened to the story told him by the sympathizing men near by. He gazed at those grim remains until his eyes closed, and his face averted itself with a shudder. But as often did his gaze return, like that of one under a spell.

His shivering increased until pitying hands lent him unasked support, while a number of flasks were pressed upon him. He accepted one, though he hardly seemed conscious of his actions. He drank—then gave a sudden start, dashing a hand across his eyes as though to clear his bewildered brain, hoarsely muttering:

"My wife! She's not—she's alive? Who said—"

A dozen persons repeated that glad assurance, and the men who lent him support offered to guide him to the house where the lady was being cared for.

At those words, Felix Brandow rallied his strength, and in more natural tones he said:

"Care for these—put a guard over them until I can think what's best to be done. Now—I'm choking! Give me more air!"

The crowd separated, and the shocked gentleman staggered away from those blood-chilling remnants of mortality, still supported by his volunteer friends.

"Takes it turrible hard, don't he?" muttered Short, as Grip-sack Sid watched that retreating figure.

"Which? His wife's safety?"

"Good Lawd!" gasped the tall man, shrinking back at that cold, hard, sneering speech. "You shorley don't mean—"

Just then a lad, bright-looking and with the keenest of black eyes, came hurrying up to where Grip-sack Sid was standing, mentally debating whether or no it would pay him to follow and keep Felix Brandow in sight.

"I say, mister!" plucking Harper by the sleeve, peering keenly into his face the while. "Ain't you the fellow that toted the leddy out o' the fire, last night?"

"Who may you be?" with a frown at the interruption.

"Tom Early, boss. An' I know ye now! I see ye when ye keeled over last night, jest like you'd got a slug that knocked ye out! An' I said then, what I want to say over now—you're white as they make 'em!"

"What do you want with me? If only to look at a curiosity, why I'm not on public exhibition just at present."

"Ef you was, at a quarter a peek, you'd make big money, boss!" the lad grinned, at the same time producing a bit of paper and holding it forth. "Fer you—from the leddy, boss!"

Grip-sack Sid caught at the paper, opening and scanning its brief contents at a glance, a hot flush leaping into his face as he read:

"MR. HARPER:—"

"In the name of her whose life you have twice saved, come to me without delay! I must see you without fail!" H. B.

"Too late now!" muttered Harper, as he saw that Felix Brandow had passed out of sight. "If I could have won the first talk! Too late!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HUSBAND IN THE WAX.

ALTHOUGH unwittingly, Grip-sack Sid muttered that regret loud enough for those sharp young ears to catch his meaning, and Tom Early said:

"She'll be all broke up ef you don't come, boss! She said I was to make sure I found ye, fust, an' then to make sure I fetched ye back with me. I said I would, but—ef I was big 'nough to pick ye up an' tote ye on the back o' me!"

Harper gave a start at his first words, but then closely scanned the lad's face while he rattled on. It was a shrewd, bright face, even if freckled like the egg of a turkey, and topped with a mat of coarse hair.

"The lady told you that, did she?" moving along where there was less danger of other ears catching their words. "And how did you know who she meant?"

"Say you'll go, boss, an' I'll tell ye the hull story," coaxingly uttered the youngster, tugging at his sleeve. "She'll go broke, ef you don't come, boss!"

"All right!" abruptly forming his resolve. "I'll go with you, just for luck!"

Tom Early gave a hop and a skip, with difficulty suppressing a yell of delight at the success of his pleading. And then, as he led the way at a brisk pace, he gave the promised explanation.

His mother, a widow, had been at the fire, and she insisted on having Helen Brandow taken to her house. Tom was there, too, as a matter of course, but his boyish sympathies had taken another direction. He followed Harper as the senseless man was taken to the Blossom House

under care of the landlord who had recognized his guest.

"Fer 'tain't every day a feller gits to see a sure-'nough man, ye want to know!" declared Tom, with a grin of undiluted admiration. "An' so, when the leddy come to, to-day, an' begged fer mother to send fer you to see her, I knowed whar to do the lookin'. But you'd gone out, an' so I follered over to the Home. An' thar you bev the story, boss!"

Harper said nothing, but in his brain was a deep regret that Tom had not delivered his message an hour earlier. If he could only have secured a private talk with Helen, now that he knew she wanted to see him so badly! And he almost cursed himself for not having thought of that before.

"Now—if I'm hitting the right trail—he'll seal her lips before I can learn anything positive!"

In so small a place as Rocky Comfort, their walk could not last long before bringing them to their destination, and ushering Grip-sack Sid into the "best room," Tom Early ran off to notify his mother or the "sick lady" of that arrival.

Harper was not kept long in waiting, but that swift footfall on the stairs, leading from the upper half-story, surely was not that of a woman, while it was too heavy for that of the boy. So, when Felix Brandow sprang into the room with outstretched hands, the Get-there Sharp was fully prepared for his greeting.

"Harper! dear man!" brokenly cried Brandow, his face flushed and his hands trembling as they clasped that of the other. "Are you determined to crush me to earth with your favors? Once again I owe to you my wife—my life, I might almost say!"

"Will you lessen your debt in degree, if I frankly tell you I hadn't the slightest intention of rescuing Mrs. Brandow?" slowly asked Harper, his gaze riveted on those feverish bright eyes.

"I don't—surely you don't mean to say that—" stammered Brandow, taken all aback by that odd speech.

"Not that I'd have left your wife to the flames," with a fitting smile, as he took note of that changing countenance. "But I had thoughts only for another—for Enid Porter, your cousin."

He felt a shiver pass through those hands, though they were in the act of dropping away from his own. And again he smiled as Brandow lowered his eyes, his lips quivering beneath his mustaches.

"Poor Enid!" he sighed, huskily, partly turning toward the open window. "If she only might have been saved! And—poor Anthony!"

"I really thought it was Miss Porter I saved, until I recovered my senses to-day, a little before noon. But—"

"Felix! Mr. Brandow!" came a faint cry from up-stairs, and Brandow turned quickly toward Harper, saying:

"You'll come, for just a moment? Helen learned you were here, and begged me to fetch you up. Will you come?"

"Since your wife seems to wish it, why not?" calmly answered Harper, as he moved toward the foot of the stairs, in the narrow entry.

Felix led the way, turning as he crossed the threshold of the low chamber in which Helen Brandow had been located. Harper had barely time to take note that she was very pale, though her face and hands showed no signs of having suffered from the flames. Then, with a low, choking voice, the woman called him by name, her trembling hands outstretched to welcome him.

"You have come—at last! I wanted so much—to thank you for all—for again saving my wretched life!"

"Not that, Helen!" quickly interposed Brandow. "Bitter as this blow has been to us both, it might have been so much worse!"

"You didn't ought, sir!" came a warning voice from just without the door, and a kindly, motherly face in a frilled cap showed itself long enough to complete the warning: "The poor dear mustn't be excited, the doctor says, and—please try to control your feelings, sir!"

Helen lay back on her pillow, her face almost as white as the linen, her lips blanched, her terrible experience seemingly adding a decade to her years in a single night. She still clasped Harper's hand, resisting his gentle attempt to withdraw it. Her lids would lift, but fall again with a shiver, as though she saw some threatening object.

Was that object her husband? Right or wrong, Grip-sack Sid jumped to that conclusion, and more to change his station for one which would command a view of Brandow as well as his wife, he withdrew his hand in spite of her evident reluctance.

Meanwhile he was making as light of his services as the case would admit, justly declaring that he had done no more than any other man could and would have done under the same circumstances.

"I'm only too proud to think that I had a chance to serve you, Mrs. Brandow," he said, as he drew back a little, standing nearer the foot of the bed, from whence he could see both husband and wife. "And since you speak of rewarding me for that service, pray do it by

rallying your strength as quickly as possible, for your own sake, if not for others."

Helen seemed growing weaker with the excitement of that meeting, and though she several times began to speak, her tones were so low and husky, her breaks so frequent, that even Harper failed to fully catch her meaning.

And, clinging to the theory he had formed almost from the first, the detective believed that Felix Brandow was the prime cause of this dangerous agitation: that Helen was kept from saying what she longed most to say, by his looks and covert warnings.

If Harper was right in this belief, then Felix Brandow proved himself an actor of rare skill. To any other person, had such been present, his conduct would have seemed simply admirable and husband-like.

"They say—tell me that it is not true!" huskily murmured the woman, a fever-light glittering in her sunken eyes. "They were not—say they escaped the fire, in mercy to all!"

"Don't, I beg of you, darling!" murmured Brandow, dropping to his knees by the bedside, clasping those uneasy hands, holding them tenderly to his cheek, as he huskily added:

"For my sake, if not for your own, my precious, don't suffer such thoughts—"

"How can I help but think?" Helen cried, lifting her head, but falling back as a hand gently touched her damp forehead. "I can hear—I can see—oh, tell me 'tis only a hideous dream!"

Through all, Grip-sack Sid was watching, trying to settle the ugly doubts that filled his busy brain. He felt almost positive the woman was not playing a part, for mental agony such as hers defied imitation. But with Felix Brandow he was not nearly so sure.

"And even she may have known, in advance, and now be tortured by remorse!" he thought, stubbornly clinging to his "theory."

"I only wish I had been able to do more, Mrs. Brandow," said Harper, taking upon himself the answer to those broken questions. "I knocked at or opened every door I could find, until I heard you cry out for help. I burst that door open, then took you out through the window. It used me up, and before I could learn for sure all the rest were saved, I broke down."

"And I—if I'd only been there to lend a helping hand!" groaned Brandow, hiding his face in the bedclothes. "And yet—'twas in their interests, far more than my own, that I hastened to Turtle Rock early that evening! And when I—"

A gasping cry from Helen's lips brought Mrs. Early bustling in with an impatient ejaculation.

"Do you two critters want to kill the poor dear? Look at her! Go 'way, and let me see—Go, I say, or I'll drive ye out!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

IS IT AN ALIBI?

WHEN a woman in authority treats a man just as though he was one of the domestic feathered bipeds, flitting an apron violently in his direction, her lips pursed up as though the next sound to issue therefrom could only be "shoo!" what can he do better than meekly obey, by beating a hasty retreat?

Sidney Harper had no sufficient excuse for remaining, since he saw there was no hope of his securing a word in private with Helen Brandow. And Felix, unless he was wronged by the detective's prejudiced fancy, seemed actually relieved when they left the chamber and Mrs. Early closed the door upon them.

"You will make allowance, Harper?" he asked, casting a look over his shoulder as he led the way down-stairs. "My poor wife—I can't even think of it all without something rising up in my throat to choke me! I fear you'll think me miserably weak and lacking in nerve, dear fellow, but—I really am all broken up!"

"Just the contrary," said Harper, as their eyes met at the foot of the stairs. "I take it you're displaying a most remarkable amount of nerve!"

With the words themselves little fault could be found. They could hardly be anything save a compliment, and yet—Felix Brandow turned abruptly toward the room where he had come to meet the Get-there Sharp.

"You're too kind, Harper," he said, seeming to expect the one addressed to tear him company, almost as a matter of course. "Under any less sad circumstances, I'd almost suspect you of sarcasm."

"Because I say what I happened to be thinking of at the time?"

"What is it you really do think, Harper?" asked Brandow, facing the unknown detective, his face very pale, but his eyes glittering vividly. "Tell me just what you really think about this terrible affair!"

"That's it: terrible," nodded Harper, gravely. "So terrible that I can't easily find words to put my feelings into. And if I feel it so heavily, being a comparative stranger, what must the blow be to those who carry the same blood in their veins? Ay!" his voice lowering, yet growing all the more impressive, "what, in comparison to the awful thoughts he must entertain to whom this fearful tragedy is owing?"

"What! you don't—merciful heavens, Harper!" gripping an arm with fierce agitation expressed in every inch of his being. "You surely can't think that—it surely was an accident!"

Harper was making the best possible use of his eyes, just then. He knew he ran a certain degree of risk in casting forth so broad a hint, in case his "theory" was correct, but he considered it worth a trial, and, right or wrong, he was prepared to cover it all over.

"An accident, no doubt, but still as fatal," he said, in calmer tones. "The fire sprung up, after some fashion, and it would be hardly fair or reasonable to believe it one of those extremely rare cases of spontaneous combustion. No I repeat: he who started that fire, last night, knows that at his door lies three deaths!"

Felix Brandow had sunk into a chair, his head bowed upon his hands, his figure shivering from crown to sole like an ague-victim. But now he seemed to rally, looking up at Harper with a half imploring light in his eyes as he muttered:

"Of course, you mean well, sir, but you're making it still harder for me to bear. Remember that I've come from a long and hard ride, at the end of which I received a terrible shock. I thought—I heard them say something about—I believed my wife was among the victims!"

"Is there a wire running to Turtle Rock, Mr. Brandow?"

"A wire?" echoed the other, a puzzled look leaping into his face, but quickly fading away. "Oh, you mean—of course I didn't know what had happened here, until I almost reached town. Then I met a couple of fellows who told me—heavens!" a hand raising to cover his eyes for a brief space.

"They told you of the fire?"

"And lied—or let me deceive myself! They said *she*—my poor wife—had been burnt to death!"

"Only a difference in kinship, yet all the difference in the world to you, of course!"

"Of course. And yet—Harper, I'd give a hand if I had only been there to save or share their fate! And yet—it was Uncle Anthony who urged me to lose not a moment in getting to Turtle Rock! It was more for his sake—his and Enid's sake—that I went there to find Esau Jacobs!"

Sidney Harper had felt himself fully on his guard, but at that totally unexpected name, he could not entirely check the start it gave him, though his quick wit supplied him with a fair cover.

"Don't let your feelings carry you too far, Brandow. I can't ask a share in any secret which poor Porter and you may have held in common, nor would I like to surprise it through the excitement with which this sad event has filled you. So—"

"But it's no secret from you, Harper," a faint smile lighting up his face as their eyes met. "You heard us talking it over."

"Not the Turtle Rock expedition?"

"Esau Jacobs, I mean. I didn't exactly like it then—for you were a complete stranger to me, and then, too, I had half an idea it was a colossal hoax! But now—I'm more than glad you shared that talk at the Sweet Home, for you can bear witness that I acted only with good cause. For you remember our talk about the diamond pin shown in that divided photograph, Harper?"

Grip-sack Sid nodded his assent. He did remember, and he felt that he was just beginning to fairly understand. Unless his theory was all wrong, Felix Brandow had laid his plans with devilish ingenuity and thoroughness.

"I'm glad of that!" giving a breath as of relief, taking from his bosom the slip of card on which the piece of jewelry in question was portrayed. "That remark of the landlord set me to thinking, and as my grip held a microscope—one I use as a sun-glass for lighting cigars or pipe, you understand—I gave the pin a close examination, in company with Uncle Anthony. And right then and there I made the discovery which ended in my taking the stage as it halted to change teams, for Turtle Rock!"

"You expected to find Esau Jacobs at that place?"

"Or the owner of a diamond pin exactly resembling this!" tapping the mutilated photograph with a finger. "I passed through Turtle Rock three days ago. At the dinner table a man sat directly opposite me, and the light reflecting from a diamond pin in his bosom attracted my notice, because a twinkle or two came directly into my eyes. Only for that, I doubt if I would have noticed aught; as it was, I couldn't for the life of me recall that man's face, or even say if his figure at all resembled the one you saw when we matched our bits of card."

"Then, of course, you failed to find your man?"

Felix Brandow nodded, gloomily.

"He was gone, and left no clew behind him. No one seemed to remember having noticed such a person."

"Tough luck, after taking so much trouble."

"Wasn't it? For myself, it didn't matter so much, but uncle was more deeply worked up

than you would think, judging simply from his looks. He fully believed that this Jacobs would turn out to be his younger brother, Lionel, and I knew he'd be counting the hours of my absence. And so, to let him off the rack as quickly as possible, I hired a horse of my host. He said there'd be no stage for Rocky Comfort until late this evening, and I couldn't afford to lose so much time. So—it was like drawing his eye-teeth, too! He finally let me have his pet nag, a thoroughbred from Kentucky, on my leaving its full value in cash, to be returned, less the hire, when he saw his racer back again, sound in wind and limb."

As he concluded his rapid explanation, Brandow begged Harper to wait for a moment, then ran up stairs, no doubt for a parting word with his wife. Then, seemingly on the best of terms with each other, the two men left the house, walking back to the still smoking ruins.

While on the way, Brandow announced his intention of taking charge of the bodies, since two of them were relatives in life.

New as he was to that region, he couldn't say whether there was a coroner within reach or not, but in case no such official could be obtained, he trusted Harper would assist him in seeing that all was done in order that could be done for the dead.

"I'm glad you asked me that," said Harper, gravely, a peculiar glitter in his eyes as they roved over the scene near to which they were drawing. "Even if you hadn't, I'm afraid I'd had chipped in. I only knew your relatives for a short time, counting by hours, but that was long enough to make them solid friends. If you're determined to probe this sad affair to the bottom, I'll do my level best to help you get there!"

"Thank you. See if you can find out anything about the—if any person is known to be missing besides—them?"

Brandow passed on to where Owen Potter, the picture of woe and dazed misery, was standing by the ruins of his office safe. The door was open, and only black ashes were visible within.

"Gone! every dollar gone! And me an old man, one foot in the grave! What's left but the poorhouse? What's left but—why didn't I burn with all the rest?" was his husky moan, as Brandow spoke to him.

Harper was not long in catching sight of Simon Short, but that worthy had little new to report. No one seemed to know aught about the third body, though there was considerable questioning being done by the curious.

"They're rakin' up every critter as was knowed to be in town on yest'day, an' ef thar's any findin' out the truth, I do reckon it won't be much longer in comin' to the top. Fer—hark!"

"Who's seen or heard anything of Billy Carter since ten o'clock last night?" called out the strong, clear voice of Mark Finn. "I saw him, 'bout that time, stepping high and mighty careful, just as a man will when he's got a load aboard, and he was heading straight for the Sweet Home!"

"Where's Potter? Ask him if he knows anything!"

But asking was in vain. Potter could not deny that possibly Carter had taken a room for the night, nor could he say that he had. His brain seemed dazed, his memory so blurred as to be almost killed.

"Let them figure it out, Simon," muttered Harper, leading his ally away from the crowd. "Did you see who took charge of the horse Brandow came here on?"

"Bet I did! Knowed the critter, too! It's over thar in a stable—why, dug-gun ef my own wits hain't gittin' all tangled up!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Fergittin' that you hung out at the Blossom House. The critter is at the stable, thar. Ef you keef for a look, why—"

"Look goes, Simon!" briskly leading the way in that direction. "I just love a horse! And this is a good one, Simon?"

"The good one, fer these parts," nodded Short. "I couldn't pretty nigh b'lieve my eyes when they tuck it in, fer Dick Johnstone counts that critter pritty nigh like he mought his best eye, ef he hed only one left to see out of!"

"You know Dick Johnstone, then? Who is he? Where does he hang out?"

"Over to Turtle Rock. Runs the Blue Grass Hotel. Pure Kaintuck, Dick is, an' a sport from all the way back! Would bet the last shirt off his back, an' throw in the hide underneath, rather then let a chance go by without a stake onto it!"

Harper made no remark, and they said nothing further until the stable was reached. They found a man busily grooming the horse, but even yet it bore signs of long and desperate exertion.

"He ought to be kicked for abusing a good nag like this! And if Dick Johnstone ever finds it out, I'm betting odds he will be, too!" the groom observed, grimly.

His last doubts settled, Harper left the stable, and Short ventured:

"Waal, what ye think, boss?"

"That there's such a thing as too perfect an alibi!"

CHAPTER XXX.

GRIP-SACK SID'S LITTLE EXPERIMENT.

SIMON SHORT stared into the face of the speaker, plainly puzzled to give this oracular sentence its proper interpretation. Harper did not offer to enlighten him, however, though he came to a halt and gazed keenly into the face of the tall man for some seconds before speaking.

Though not a little taken aback by this action, Simon never flinched. He had nothing to conceal from a friend, and as a friend he regarded this man. That the sentiment was tinged with a certain degree of awe, which men of his rearing naturally invests such mysterious characters as detectives with, rendered him none the less willing to take on trust what he might have preferred to investigate in others.

"You're white, Simon!" nodded Harper, after that keen gaze came to an end. "I'm more than glad to be convinced, too, for just now I've got more irons in the fire than I can well look after. You're still willing to lend me a hand?"

"Try me, boss!"

"And even if you can't see just what I'm trying to get at?"

"That don't figger, so long's you make me see jest what you want me to do. I'd hate to make a botch o' anythin' you set me at, though!"

"Little danger, so long as you stick to the line I mark out. You know Felix Brandow, of course?"

"Waal, not to say know," hesitatingly. "I see him, 'long o' you, but I never see him afore he come up on Dick Johnstone's critter."

"Then he doesn't know you?"

"Not from a side o' sole-leather, he wouldn't!" with confidence.

"Just what I was hoping!" and Grip-sack Sid gave a short, hard chuckle. "Of course you could pick him out of a crowd, though?"

Simon Short nodded assent, his interest growing with anticipation.

"All right. I'm going to try a little experiment, through you, my boy, simply because you can do what I couldn't. Now—I want you to watch your chance and go up to Felix Brandow, from behind. Don't let him see you coming. Slap him smartly on the shoulder, and call him Paul Jackson. Understand?"

Simon Short twisted his grizzled beard, gazing into those glowing eyes, plainly perplexed.

"But he hain't no more like—"

"Never you mind that, Simon. You'll not be the first man who's mistaken one for another. You took me for Esau Jacobs, remember!"

"But—you was so mighty like him, I jest couldn't help it!"

"Play this is just such another case. Do as I say, and try to read what his eyes say when he hears that name. Do your best to look puzzled when he denies that he's the person—as he surely will—and note everything his face and eyes say. You can turn the trick if you will, and more may depend on it than you think just now!"

"I'll do my level best, boss!" quietly said Simon, turning toward the ruins, once more in sight.

He had no difficulty in singling out the tall figure of Felix Brandow, who was giving directions to a few men in regard to caring for the bodies found in the ruins.

Just as Simon Short drew near, he turned away from that ugly sight, his face betraying strong if suppressed emotion. And then, as Brandow stood staring vacantly at the blackened safe, near which Owen Potter was still pouring forth his doleful lamentations, Short tapped him sharply on a shoulder, uttering the words put in his mouth by Grip-sack Sid, playing his part to perfection.

"Hellow, ef it hain't Paul Jackson, I'm a liar! How, pardner?"

Felix Brandow crouched under that touch, wheeling at the same time, one hand instinctively dropping toward his waist, as though in quest of a deadly weapon.

But he swiftly rallied, sternly saying:

"I don't know you, sir, nor is my name Jackson!"

"Waal, ef I didn't—durned ef I ever—beg pardon, stranger, but I'd 'a' tuck my davy to your back!" stammered Simon, falling back.

"That's all right, only—be sure you're right, next time," curtly spoke Brandow, moving on to where Owen Potter was mourning.

With the sheepish air of one caught in an awkward mistake, Simon Short moved away in the opposite direction, and when he knew Brandow must have lost sight of him in the crowd, even if trying to trace his going, he hastened to rejoin the Get-there Sharp.

Harper smiled grimly as he scanned the puzzled face of his emissary, but he said nothing until they were secure from dangerous observation. Then he asked:

"How did it pan out, pardner?"

"Waal, sir, I'm clean mixed all up!"

"After just what fashion, Simon?"

"Ef I could tell you that, mebbe 'twouldn't be botherin' of me so dug-gun much," scowling darkly at vacancy, unmercifully tugging at his beard, as though his wits were slumbering beneath that dense covering, and he hoped to awaken them by such means.

"I saw you touch the spring, and our man

answered in a hurry. Just what did he say, Simon?"

"Said I was a liar, or what 'mounted to pritty much the same thing when ye come to look at it. Anyway, he said he wasn't Paul Jackson."

"Of course, with his lips! But what did his face, his eyes say?"

"Waal, ef I wasn't mighty heap off, they all said he was turrible scared, jest fer one breath, likel!"

Harper laughed, softly, in strange contrast to the savage glitter filling his keen gray eyes.

"Looked frightened, did he? Strange, too, seeing he can't possibly be the man whose name you pronounced!"

Simon Short drew a long breath, finding it difficult to select the right words with which to express his meaning.

"Waal, 'course he couldn't, but—ef 'twasn't fer his—ef he only hed light ha'r an' winkers! But them o' his is blacker'n a crow in new feather! So—durned ef I hain't growin' crazy, I do b'lieve! You don't reckon it kin be, boss?"

"If the man you spoke to only had light hair and brows, with a full beard, you'd really take Brandow for Jackson, then?"

"I'd come mighty nigh tellin' him he was a howlin' liar ef he so much as hinted he wasn't!" impulsively cried Short. "I mebbe wouldn't 'a' noticed it, 'count o' the change from yaller to black, but now I've spoke to him as Paul Jackson, an' now I've looked into them two eyes o' his'n, an' now I call up how turrible skeered them eyes looked when he whirled to face me! Boss, what's at the bottom of it all?"

There came no immediate reply. Harper met that gaze squarely, and Short seemed to feel those gray eyes boring their way clear into his brain. If there had been a single ugly blot on his record—beyond the wrong done to himself, of which he had spoken so frankly when first meeting the man he mistook for Esau Jacobs—he could not have helped flinching from that ordeal.

As it was, he stood it steadily. Only perplexity was to be read in his eyes. Only that, and a sturdy if slightly dull honesty.

"Look here, Short," at length said the detective, one hand going out to rest lightly on the tall man's shoulder, while that keen gaze still continued, "I believe you are clean white."

"Scratch me deep, boss, an' see fer your own self," was the quiet response.

"And as a white man, I'm going to ask you a few questions."

"Ef I don't answer 'em, be sure I'll not tell ye any lies."

"I'm not afraid of that, but I want you to answer them, and answer them in my favor, too!"

"Not any more'n I'd like to answer 'em that way, boss, but—waal, I hain't knowed you so mighty long, an' the longer I do know ye, the less I think I know 'bout ye!"

Harper laughed, softly. Difficult as Simon Short found it to express his meaning, Grip-sack Sid comprehended what he would have said.

"You'll be wiser after a bit, Simon. I've got to test my tools before letting them know just what class of work they're to be used on. Of course, if you find I'm crooked, any promise you may have given will be null and void. Now—will you hire out to me for a few days?"

"Not ef you offer me pay in money, sir."

"Why not?"

"Fer one thing, I'm plenty rich 'nough as it is. I've got more money put away than I'll ever be able to spend, even ef I don't do a lick o' work fer the rest o' my life. He helped me to it: Esau Jacobs."

"Then, if you had a chance to serve Esau Jacobs, you would?"

"Show me the way, an' I'm all thar! Why, sir, I'd wade through hell-fire to my lips, ef so doin' could help that man!" earnestly cried the miner, his face working, his eyes all aglow.

"Then you're just the man I want, and just the man I'm bound to have on my side!" grimly declared Grip-sack Sid. "I believe there is a deep-laid scheme to get hold of his money, and when I tell you that I'm almost sure Anthony Porter and his daughter were brought out here to share the fate of Esau Jacobs, you can judge if he's in danger! And more—I believe Felix Brandow is the head of that evil gang!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GET-THERE SHARP IN DEMAND.

IF GRIP-SACK SID wished to begin his new deal by surprising the ally he sought, he certainly was taking the right way to bring that about. Simon Short was more than surprised, he was nearly paralyzed.

A man with a quicker wit would long since have discounted this secret, and have known whither Sidney Harper's suspicions were leading him. Simon Short was a good man, and far more to be desired as an ally than as an enemy, but it took considerable time for him to get at the marrow of things, even after the bone of fact was put in his hand.

He stared at the detective, his face slowly flushing, his eyes winning the red light of danger. And then, when he could master his tongue, he almost savagely uttered:

"Prove it! Prove that much, an' I'll mash the pizen critter clean into the airth!"

"Softly, pardner," nodded Grip-sack Sid, one hand closing on the tall fellow's arm to check any rash breakaway. "The main question is one I put before: will you work under my orders for a few days?"

"You bet I will! Ef it's to help Esau out, I'm more'n with ye!"

"And you'll go it blind for a little while? You'll take it for granted I know what is best to do, and how it ought to be done?"

"Ef you say best so, best so it goes, boss."

"Good enough!" and Grip-sack Sid gave a crisp nod of grim pleasure. "Then bear in mind you're not to do anything, say anything, or even look anything that can possibly put yonder fellow on his guard. You understand what I mean, of course?"

"Ef he should be so bad skeered he tries to slope?"

"Don't you worry on that score. He's not built that way. There's too big a stake depending, and matters are so fixed that he couldn't run, even if he wanted to."

"Then I'm layin' low, boss."

There was a brief silence, during which Grip-sack Sid seemed watching something beyond Simon Short, and that worthy turned his head in natural curiosity. He saw a lad slouching along the street, but he was not quick enough to see what Grip-sack Sid saw: a covert but energetic signal, plainly intended for himself.

It hardly needed this to freshen his memory and recall that freckled face, that mop of black hair, that slender but muscular frame. And readily guessing what Tom Early wanted with him, Harper spoke quickly:

"Haven't time to tell you anything plainer, just now, pardner. You keep an eye on old Potter for the present, and if Brandow has any talk with him, try if you can't catch a word or two, without showing your hand too plainly. You can do almost anything at a time and in a place like this, and bluff it off as country curiosity."

"I'm to watch Potter—yen' fat cuss? An' ef t'other critter don't go to him, but t'otherways?"

"Stick to Potter. Brandow might remember your rig-out if you hung about him, and of all things, we can't afford to scare him too bad, too soon. Stick to Potter, and I'll look out for the rest."

Simon Short turned away with a promptitude that promised a very obedient if not brilliant assistant, and Grip-sack Sid strode briskly along the street like one who has his destination in view.

It was barely possible that he had mistaken that gesture, but if he had not, he knew Tom Early would not permit this chance to pass unimproved.

"I say, boss!" came a low, eager whisper, as Grip-sack Sid was in the act of passing by the youngster. "Jest lookin' fer you, I was!"

At the same time a dirty paw touched Harper's hand, and left a scrap of paper between his fingers.

"Ef ye kin, boss, I hope ye will!" the boy added, as he passed on ahead with a hop and a skip, the picture of idle happiness.

Grip-sack Sid opened the paper and read its contents at a single glance as it lay in the hollow of his curved palm. It bore neither address nor signature, but he knew that only one person in Rocky Comfort could have scrawled those words:

"Come back—and alone! I must confess!"

How those gray eyes did glitter as he read those few words! How swiftly the hot blood leaped through his veins! And his strong teeth clicked audibly as he cast a seemingly careless glance backward, to make sure that Felix Brandow was not following him.

"Then there is something to confess! Didn't I know as much? And now, my dear Felix Brandow, if I haven't got rope enough to fit your elegant neck, I'm betting long odds I will have before the sun goes down on those charred bodies!"

He turned the corner around which Tom Early had vanished, and now that they were surely bidden from any and all of the curious crowd, the center of whose interest lay where Owen Potter's Sweet Home had stood, the youngster made no bones about openly speaking to the man who had so powerfully attracted his fancy by his daring rescue the night last past.

"You'll do it, boss?" almost coaxingly, hero-worship glowing in his head-like eyes as he tried to read that strong, immobile face. "Ef you only khowed how turrible bad she wants fer to see ye!"

"It's been little more than an hour since I was there, sonny, and I hardly got pay for my trouble, at that."

"So was somebody else thar, wasn't they?" with a grimace that told how little fancy he had for the somebody hinted at.

"Somebody else may come again, and that wouldn't be pleasant."

"You've jest got to come, boss!" declared Tom, grasping a hand that made a move of seeming reluctance. "She's pritty nigh crazy over it, an' ef you don't come, she said she'd hev

to go hunt ye up! An' mother says that'd be her sure death ef she tried it!"

Harper hesitated, as though still in doubt, but it was mainly for the purpose of reading the youngster. Had Brandow suspected aught from his former call, and was this part of his scheme to learn the whole truth?

It seemed hardly probable, but unless he had wronged the man from the very outset, it was quite possible.

"You could hardly show greater earnestness if you was working for big wages, sonny. How much did he pay you for the job?"

"Who's he? I ain't doin' no job fer no he, but fer a leddy—say you'll come, boss! Ef you won't—but you've jest got to! An' I'll keep anybody from comin' in afore she hes her say out. I'll— Say, boss, ef that black-lip feller comes, shell I slug him from kiver?"

"Would you try it on, bub?"

"Bet yer boots! She made both me'n mother promise we wouldn't let him come back to her room while she felt so powerful bad, an' ef it's him you don't want to ketch ye thar, bet yer boots I'd slug him!"

Grip-sack Sid was a better judge of men than of boys, but he felt that Tom Early was in thorough earnest, just now. And relieved on that point, he willingly enough quickened his pace.

"All right, my boy! I'll go see the lady, since she appears to wish it that way. As for the slugging, never you mind about that part of it. If slugging is in the game, I'm plenty big enough to hold my end level."

"Good Lawd! ef I could only see it come off!" ejaculated Tom, his eyes and mouth open.

"Why, boss, you'd jest walk all over that dude, you would!"

Grip-sack Sid paid no attention to that enthusiastic prediction, though he rarely received a more genuine compliment. His thoughts were on the coming interview, and trying to decide upon the wisest method of "getting there!"

A keen glance around satisfied him that Felix Brandow was not in sight, and that no other was dogging his steps. And as Tom Early noted this look, he spoke up promptly:

"They's nobody goin' to git in this shebang, boss, untel you've come down. Ef that black-lip feller tries it, I'll set up sech a howlin' the bull town 'll come with a rush! Bet I jest will, now!"

Turning the caller over to his mother, who met them at the door, Tom turned to stand guard. Mrs. Early, while bluntly declaring that she strongly disapproved of such conduct, predicting a fatal relapse on the part of her invalid guest, conducted Grip-sack Sid up stairs to the chamber where Helen Brandow was still lying on the bed, though she now wore a gown and other garments, borrowed for the present from the kindly widow's wardrobe.

"It's jest wickedness!" declared Mrs. Early, the strings of her cap fluttering with her emphatic nods, as she glanced from woman to man. "You'll be right down sick, lady, to pay for it! And you, sir—"

"Could not refuse to visit a lady in sore distress, ma'am," gravely interposed the detective. "And when you know how much may depend on this little chat, I know you'll freely forgive us both."

"Remember—don't let him—don't let any one else come up, without warning, my dear friend?" hurriedly added Helen. "Not—you haven't forgotten?"

"Tommy's on the watch, and so 'll I be. But—if hurt comes to you through my lettin' this excitement go on, I'll be fit to die!"

Mrs. Early left the chamber, closing the door behind her. Both kept silence until her heavy footfalls died away at the bottom of the stairs, though neither could really suspect the widow of trying to play eavesdropper. Her face was too honest for that.

"I am sorry to see you looking so worn, Mrs. Brandow," said Harper, sitting down, his eyes grave as his voice. "This has been a sore trial for you, I'm afraid."

"Don't—don't talk like that!" panted the woman, shrinking from his kindly tones as though they gave her acutest pain. "I'm not fit to—what did he say to you, down-stairs?"

"You mean your husband?"

"Yes, my husband," shivering as she spoke. "What did he tell you? The truth—don't try to smooth it over! I want to know just what he said, before I can tell you—what I begged your coming for."

Speaking quietly, hoping thus to soothe her hysterical emotion, Sidney Harper complied, briefly but clearly showing what a complete alibi Felix Brandow had offered for himself. Of course he kept his own suspicions under cover for the present. It was his object to receive rather than furnish clues.

But he might have saved himself the pains. Helen Brandow was watching his face while listening, and it is possible his very calmness only helped to confirm the suspicion awakened by his actions at the Sweet Home when that mutilated photograph was under discussion.

If not that, then a woman's instinct guided her, for, as he came to a pause, Helen Brandow burst forth with poorly subdued fierceness:

"Who are you, Sidney Harper? You're no common man, I know only too well! But—why are you showing such deep interest in this case?"

"Isn't it enough that I am a man, Mrs. Brandow? Remember how we were flung together by fate, and having once been permitted to save her life, could I do less than mourn her awful death?"

"Don't—not that!" shivering again, briefly averting her face, then coming back with a touch of the former impetuosity: "Before that happened, I mean. At the table, for one thing. You are a gentleman, but you crowded forward to see, as no gentleman would have done, unless he was urged by much more than bare curiosity. And so I ask—what are you? Why are you so deeply interested in this Esau Jacobs case?"

Harper hesitated, gazing steadily into her feverish face. Before he could fully decide upon the wisest answer to make, Helen Brandow said:

"You are a detective! I feared so then, I pray so now! Are you?"

"If I should say yes, would you be so much afraid of me, Mrs. Brandow?" slowly asked the Get-There Sharp.

"If you are a detective, with powers to—swear that you'll protect me against Felix Brandow, Mr. Harper, and I'll tell you all!"

Grip-sack Sid's eyes glittered, but he held his grim joy in check, and there was nothing more than blank surprise to be read in his voice as he quickly ejaculated:

"Protect you? Against—surely not your own husband, ma'am?"

Helen Brandow laughed, short and hard, her face flushing hotly.

"My husband—yes! Yet, what did he do only last night?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

HELEN BRANDOW'S CONFESSION.

"WHAT could he do, absent at Turtle Rock? You must not forget that he has proved a perfect *alibi*, Mrs. Brandow," slowly said Harper.

He hardly expected as much, and instantly felt that he had, in some manner unknown to himself, as yet, let slip an important chance, for as by magic Helen Brandow lost her wild, fierce excitement, growing calm and composed, at least to the outward eye.

"No doubt you are wondering why I sent you two such urgent notes, Mr. Harper. If nothing more, an explanation is due you, and I am ready to give it—the best I can offer."

"You were asking my protection, I believe?"

"Wait," with a sharp nod. "Let me talk after my own manner, or I will never be able to tell what I have determined to make known. And first—I liked you from the very first, Sidney Harper. Don't frown: I'm not what you thought me then: a coquette by birth and training. Not now. I may have been such, then. It seems so long ago that—but I'm telling the truth."

"I did like you, not only because you might save me from what had seemed certain death or madness, but because I saw in you a man—a manly man! But you—you disliked me just as much as I liked you! I saw that, so don't deny it. What matter—now?"

"I was nearly crazed then. I'm not much better now, your eyes say, but you are wrong. I'm simply speaking the whole truth, for once in my life! I say I liked you. I could have done much more, if you had been less a thoroughly honest man. I could have loved you, as only women of my temperament can love!"

"Why bring up what is past and gone, Mrs. Brandow?" muttered the detective, embarrassed by this unexpectedly plain speaking. "Even if it was true, which I deny, what—"

"Which you admit, rather!" with another hard laugh. "You mean well, sir, but your pity is worse than wasted, now! You disliked me, partly because you saw I hated Enid. Stop! 'tis simple truth. I *did* hate her, but why? Because my husband aroused my mad jealousy! Because he made me believe her insane passion for him had driven him from home, from me, his wife!"

"He lied if he even hinted at such a vile idea!"

"I know he lied—*now*. If I had known it before, perhaps all this would never have come to pass. And yet—Mr. Harper, do you know why I was so nearly caught by death, last night?"

"The smoke stupefied you, no doubt?"

"That may have helped, but—*Felix Brandow tried to murder me!*"

Despite his iron nerve, Harper shrunk back from those fierce glittering eyes, his first thought being that her past perils had in truth turned her brain.

"No, I'm not crazy," once more crushing down her fiercely excitement lest it injure instead of helping her in her sore need. "And I'll try to prove as much, if you'll only listen to the story I have to tell."

"Go on. I'll listen, gladly."

"Felix Brandow deserted me, nearly four years ago. He left an unsigned note which gave his reasons: he said Enid Porter had almost won his heart, while giving hers to him without reserve. Until he could cure himself of this, as

yet, incomplete infidelity, I should never see or hear from him again.

He left me but little money, and when that was gone, I sought and found an engagement on the variety stage, in Chicago. I made a bare living thus, until I received a letter from my husband.

"In it he told me of a truly wonderful discovery fate had throw in his way. He said he was acting as confidential clerk and secretary for Esau Jacobs, from whom he had received so many presents. And then, swearing me to secrecy, he told me of a plot which was taking shape, and which might be turned to our great profit."

"First swearing that his fancy for Enid was dead, he told me that Esau Jacobs was really Lionel Porter, my uncle, who had been lost sight of for so many years! That he had made an immense fortune speculating in mines and mining property. That, under ordinary circumstances he was a shrewd, keen, bright man of business, but that of late he had taken a strange fancy into his head: he feared that he was doomed to an early death, because of his heart failing."

"Until this fancy struck him, Felix wrote, Esau Jacobs kept his secret so perfectly that he, my husband, never even suspected him of being other than he claimed: a man without family, without blood-ties. He had, more than once, expressed his regret that at his death there would be none of his blood to share his property. And in hopes of winning at least a handsome legacy, Felix did his level best to keep his position, and to make Jacob believe him a model of manly honor!"

Helen Brandow laughed, low and bitterly, as those words passed her lips, her face full of intense scorn and even hatred. Grip-sack Sid maintained perfect silence. He feared to speak, lest her too-excited brain take yet another shift.

"Then, having made all this clear to me, Felix Brandow said still more: said that his heart relenting at what he really believed was approaching death, Esau Jacobs formed a plan so odd, so whimsical, that one entirely sane would hardly have conjured it up."

"He trusted his secretary, and between them all the minor details were fully arranged. Esau Jacobs had kept track of us all, if only for the purpose of mystifying us by those birthday gifts. So it was not difficult for him to set his shrewd—for shrewd it was, after a crazy fashion—plot in motion."

"We, his relatives, were all to be summoned to meet the being who kept such careful note of our birthdays. If curiosity alone was not powerful enough to bring us, the hint of possible benefit which he added to each summons, would bring about his wishes. Then he was to make his identity known. He was to prove his name, his relationship, and we were to be made believe him a beggar, stricken with a mortal disease, who needed what he begged, a comfortable home and kindly nursing for the remnant of his days."

"Of course, being a relative, he did not expect an actual refusal but he meant to keenly if covertly watch us all, and the one who showed him the truest sympathy, was to be selected as his legatee."

Mrs. Brandow paused, exhausted by her rapid speech. And Grip-sack Sid ventured to put into words a thought which bothered him slightly.

"You say Esau Jacobs kept track of all of his relatives. If that includes your husband, how could Brandow act the part of secretary?"

"By giving a fictitious address, for he did not care to risk losing that regular gift; in his case it usually took the form of a generous check. He had a friend personate him, I believe."

Harper nodded his understanding, and Helen Brandow resumed:

"All this Felix made clear to me, and then tutored me in my part. Of course I would be summoned; and I was to obey, ready to play an angelic role! I was to dissolve with pity and tender love for the poor exile! I was—but why say more? You can readily guess the rest!"

"I can guess that, needing money as you must, you could fall into the views of your husband to a certain extent, but—surely you did not go further?" almost sternly demanded Harper, his eyes glittering as they tried to read the whole truth in that paling face.

Helen Brandow shrunk back from his gaze, but only for a single breath. Then, rallying, she cried out in husky tones:

"No, not that! As Heaven hears me, sir, I never once dreamed of anything worse than a comparatively innocent deception! For, I swear to you, sir, I really meant to be kind to the man, my uncle, if he should choose me to live with! As for—by my dead mother's grave! I swear I am guiltless of anything worse than that!"

"I believe you, Mrs. Brandow," said Harper, taking her trembling hand between both of his, trying to soothe her wild agitation by his magnetic powers. "Go on. You have still more to relate?"

"I thank you—thank you from the bottom of my heart, Mr. Harper, for I need—just how badly I need your friendship and protection, you shall see for yourself!"

"When all the details were arranged, I came here, as you know. We failed to find Uncle Lionel—even yet I don't know why! And, after what has happened, I'm afraid even to guess at the cause of his absence."

"Don't ask—I must be quick or—if he should come back! But I'm almost done. It was at supper—after Felix went away—and I was taken sick almost as soon as I could get to my chamber. I threw up what I had eaten and drank—and as Heaven hears me! *I tasted morphine!*"

"You think what you drank had been drugged?"

"I know it! Know it now, but I was too ill to think what it meant, at the time. Then—I laid down to sleep it off. I did sleep, until the heat and smoke wakened me. And when I tried to open my door, to escape, I found it was locked from the outside! And more—the key had been broken off in the lock!"

"You were so excited that possibly you only fancied all this?"

"Fancy?" with a short, bitter laugh. "No, 'twas God's truth! And now I know the whole awful truth! I know that Owen Potter drugged us all, by command of Felix Brandow, to insure our death when the hotel burned!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GETTING READY TO CLOSE IN.

GRIP-SACK SID gave a start at those words, although he had long since discounted the revelation. Still, even he was not proof against the shock one happily mated nearly always feels when meeting a case of matrimonial misery.

"Surely not, Mrs. Brandow!" he muttered, longing to offer consolation, yet unable to find words befitting. "He may be bad, but not that bad!"

"Worse—a thousand times worse than that!" was the low, fierce addition. "For what was I? Sinful enough, when compared to others, although I solemnly swear that I have told you my greatest sin! But she—Enid—was pure as an angel! I know it now, though I hated her then! I know—and if I was drugged, were not *they*, as well?"

Grip-sack Sid made no immediate reply. His face turned paler, and the hand which rose to meet his face as his head bowed, trembled after a fashion very unusual for the detective.

His thoughts were with Enid, whom he had learned to love as he had loved his sister, now in her grave. It was hard to think of her as a victim to such an atrocious plot, and yet—

"I trust you are right, Mrs. Brandow," he said, lifting his head and looking steadily into her pale face. "I most sincerely trust both Enid and Anthony Porter were heavily drugged that night!"

Mrs. Brandow stared at the speaker like one unable to understand, but that did not last long. And, covering her face with her hands, she brokenly sobbed a similar wish.

Sternly putting aside grief for the time being, Grip-sack Sid was swiftly reviewing the story told by Mrs. Brandow, looking for its weak points as well as its stronger ones. Of the former he recalled several, but only one of seeming importance enough to be called up, just then. When there was more time to spare, the odds and ends must be gathered up and smoothed off, but now—

"Mrs. Brandow, please explain one point in your story. You said Esau Jacobs was your uncle, Lionel Porter?"

"So Felix assured me."

"Which would make him Anthony Porter's own brother. Then, even if disappointed at finding a pauper where he had been led to expect a rich man, would a brother, and a true man like Anthony, show his disappointment so plainly that Lionel would deliberately select *you* as his heiress?"

"But—Uncle Anthony wasn't to know that! He was to see only a sick beggar, who had acted like a crank, and—"

"You said different, while telling your story. According to that, he was to make his identity known, was to prove his relationship and claim, or beg, home and care on that score."

Helen Brandow brushed a hand across her eyes with a troubled expression. She could not doubt Harper's earnestness, and her face paled as though she feared a worse punishment than she really deserved.

"Did I—I must, since you say I did! But I didn't mean it. Only those who were supposed to be in the secret; only Esau Jacobs and his secretary. And the truth was not to be revealed until each of us had been thoroughly tested and his final selection made. This, I swear to you, sir, is the truth, as Felix made me believe."

"I'm not doubting you in the least, only—it left an ugly gap in the game, and I wanted all made clear as I went along."

With a long breath that was almost a gasp, the woman sunk back upon her pillow, weak and unnerved, feeling the effects of that terrible strain. It had lasted too long, already, but Grip-sack Sid was not yet satisfied.

"What first turned your suspicions toward your husband, Mrs. Brandow? Why should you think he meant you to form one of the lost, last night?"

"For one thing he would be left the sole living relative to Lionel Porter. Only by marriage, 'tis true, but none other would have a better claim to the money. Then—when I found Esau Jacobs was not there to meet us—when it was said both he and his clerk, Paul Jackson, had disappeared without leaving any clew behind—I caught a glimpse of the truth, and must have betrayed something of my suspicion. For Felix tried to explain, and only made matters worse. I threatened him—I forget just what I did say, now, but it must have been enough to show him I'd never consent to actual crime. And so—he tried to murder me! And—you'll not let him, dear friend? You'll protect me against that devil?"

"I'll give you my pledge to that effect, Mrs. Brandow; can I depend on you to stick to this story?"

"Yes!" rising up, her face flushing, her eyes all aglow. I know he murdered them, even as he tried to murder me, his wife! Only protect me from him until you can prove him guilty! Only save my life until then, and I'll tell all, before any court of justice in the land!"

There was no possible room for doubting her perfect sincerity, and the Get-there Sharp warmly clasped her hands between his as he gave her his oath of guardianship, adding, rapidly:

"But you must play your part, as well, dear friend! You must keep him deceived until I can complete the chain of proof. Don't let him be alone with you for a single minute. Play sick, act as though you were delirious all the time. Don't touch food or drink save such as Mrs. Early gives you with her own hand. You can trust her, and her boy. And I'll see that your husband runs against a snag in case he should try to force his way into your presence. Will that satisfy you?"

Helen Brandow nodded. Her eyes were full of tears, her agitation too great for speech, just then. And fearing to lose more time, Grip-sack Sid bade her have courage, then left the chamber.

Mrs. Early was on guard, but he detained that good woman long enough to make her comprehend how all-important it was that the sick lady should not receive callers other than himself.

"She'll hardly require a doctor, and above all, you must bar out the fellow who calls himself her husband. On no account must you permit him to gain admittance to her chamber. She will tell you the same, and has my permission to confide in you. You are willing to take so much care and trouble on your hands?"

"There's nothing wrong, nothing wicked in it, sir?" slowly asked the widow, at the same time steadily searching Harper's face.

"Wickedness enough, Mrs. Early, but I'm asking your help to guard against the evil ones," with a short, frank laugh. "You can't think the lady up-stairs is so wicked as to be wholly unworthy of your care?"

"I don't believe she's wicked at all!" almost indignantly cried the widow. "I'd sooner think you was, if she didn't call you her best and only friend—poor dear!"

"I am her friend, but not her only one, since you and your boy are near her. Now, for reasons which I haven't time to fully explain, though Mrs. Brandow may, if she thinks best, I must beg you not only to keep her from being intruded upon, but to see that she eats and drinks nothing save what you prepare with your own hands. And, do you know of a trusty man who could be hired to stand guard, here?"

"If my brother Dan'l—Gregg was my name—"

"Not Dan Gregg, who was with the stage when it got caught in the fire?" interrupted Harper, his face lightening up at the idea.

But so it was. And, although she could not comprehend what it all portended, Mrs. Early promised everything the detective wished. She would see that Dan Gregg kept near enough to the house to come to the rescue in case the widow and her son were not strong enough to keep out all intruders.

Giving Tom a few coins, which that worthy refused to accept until assured that they were a gift, not a bribe to stand true to the lady who had so completely won his heart and liking, Grip-sack Sid hastened away from that spot, drawing a long breath of relief when he left the building out of sight without meeting Felix Brandow, or any other whom he could suspect of playing the spy on his movements.

"A lot of time spent, but hardly wasted!" was his mental summing up, as his brain swiftly passed in review all that had happened since he received that second note from Helen Brandow. "I felt that he was crooked from the very first, but just what sort of devilry he had in hand—that was the point! Now—I'll get there! And so will Felix Brandow, alias Paul Jackson! Get there—at the end of a rope!"

Simon Short was still at his post of duty, near the ruins around which Owen Potter still revolved, making his husky moans, seemingly un-

able to tear himself away from the spot where, as he so dolefully asserted, his little all had gone up in smoke.

His first glance failed to reveal aught of Felix Brandow, but as he likewise took note of the fact that those sickening remnants of humanity had been removed from the spot where placed on being taken from the ruins, Grip-sack Sid felt little uneasiness on that score.

Simon Short was on the lookout, and in obedience to a covert signal given by the man whom he temporarily acknowledged as "boss," he followed after the Get-there Sharp when the latter turned away from the ruins.

It was now growing late in the afternoon, and both men were beginning to feel the need of replenishing their stomachs, but with Gripsack Sid it was business before pleasure, and he was not to break that rule in this instance.

Slipping a hand through Short's arm, strolling on in leisurely fashion, like men who are at peace with all the world, Harper asked his lengthy ally what information he had gleaned since their separation.

"Not 'nough to hurt anybody, I'm 'feard," replied Simon. "I done the best I knowed, an' kept pritty much like his own shadder to the fat crank. Sbell I tell ye all he kept talkin' to his own self, boss?"

"No. I can guess what it amounted to, from the sample I picked up before I set you to work. Did the other fellow try to have any private talk with Potter?"

"Jest once, an' then it tuck less'n a weenty minnit. I tried to git nigh 'nough fer to ketch his talk, but 'twas all over afore I come thar. He jest let drape a few words—I kin sw'ar to so much! But he passed on, an' never ag'in come nigh 'nough the cranky critter to talk to him, 'thout hollerin'."

"I wish you had managed to catch those words," frowned Harper, but quickly adding: "Mind, I'm not blaming you in the least. I know you did your best, and that best is all any man could have done. Still—I'd rather have heard those few words than a much longer speech!"

Simon looked puzzled, but Harper understood his own meaning. He believed those few words had appointed a rendezvous between two evil men, both implicated in the foulest of plots.

"By the way, pardner," casting a keen glance into Short's face as they walked slowly along in the direction of the Blossom House, "what do you think of Owen Potter, anyway?"

"That crazy crank?"

Grip-sack Sid gave vent to a low laugh, full of amusement, yet with a trace of sarcasm which even Simon was keen enough to detect.

"Waal, ef he hain't jest crazy, he comes so dug-gun close to it that they hain't no fun into it!" he muttered, a little doggedly.

"Mourning over his losses, of course! House, furniture, money, all! Pity he couldn't at least have saved his honor from the general wreck, isn't it, pardner?"

Simon Short looked squarely into that mocking countenance.

"You mean a mighty sight more'n you say, boss: what is it?"

"Well, would you believe me if I were to tell you that crazy crank, as you call him, is one of the brightest, smartest, keenest knaves out of jail this day?"

"Ef you did say it, boss, reckon I'd hev to b'lieve, but—durned ef it wouldn't take a powerful lot o' 'magination on my part, though!"

"It's gospel truth, all the same, Simon. He's cheated justice for the past five years, to my certain knowledge. I came to Rocky Comfort expressly to arrest Owen Potter for a crime committed five years ago."

"What sort o' crime, ef 'tain't a secret, boss?" hesitated Short, as Harper volunteered no more explicit information.

"For a crime much the same as this; for arson, which cost four good lives!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FIRST TRAP SPRUNG.

"STEADY, OWEN!" muttered a low but painfully distinct voice as an arm was linked in his. "Give a peep loud as that of a new-born chick, and I'll lift your roof clean off!"

Only one thing could feel so cold when thrust into his ear, and Owen Potter knew that thing must be the muzzle of a pistol!

Never was a man more completely taken by surprise. One moment hurrying along through the deepening dusk, without another person in sight. The next, to have that hand slipped through his arm, holding him with a grip like a vise, that voice giving him warning, backed up by a gun clapped against his head!

And then, grimly silent, a second figure made itself felt as well as seen, securing his other arm!

"What—mercy!" he gasped, but hardly hearing his own plea, so afraid was he of causing that grim threat to become an actuality.

"Button up, Owen! Not a word more, or off comes your roof! You seem to be bound somewhere? All right! So are we, and I reckon we'll keep you company for a minute or two at all events. And—just try to keep your memory bright on one point: we're three already, and

every fool knows that's a crowd. So, if we should happen to meet up with any of your particular friends, just give them the cut direct. For—it cuts me to the very heart to have to give a gentleman in grief, like you are, words with the bark on, Owen!—if you try to ring in other company, we'll leave you on their hands, and if one of 'em's an undertaker, so much the better! You sabe, Owen Potter?"

Whether he did or no, Owen Potter gave no sign beyond that spasmodic shivering and a smothered groan of undiluted fear. He hung heavily on the hands of his captors, but they were strong enough to keep him on his feet and hurry him rapidly out of town.

Not another word was spoken until the last houses were fairly left to the rear, then, giving Potter a sharp jerk, Grip-sack Sid spoke in low but distinct tones:

"That's enough, Jasper Goodman!"

He may have intended a more extended warning, but instinctively divining what that sudden start meant, Grip-sack Sid clapped a hand over the fellow's mouth, though he had to shift his pistol in so doing.

"Shuttrap, you! Cry out, and I'll crack your pate in earnest! It's pure business, Jasper, and you're plenty old enough to understand what that means. Now—steady!" as his hand came away.

"I'm not—I don't know—"

"You'll be wiser in another minute or two, Jasper," with a low, hard laugh. "You've reached the length of your tether, and the slip-knot is closing about your neck. You've dreamed of that more than once during the past five years, haven't you, Goodman?"

"My name is Potter, not Goodman, nor Jasper," muttered the prisoner.

Grip-sack Sid cast a keen glance around before replying to this denial. They were fairly out of town, and in a spot sufficiently retired to suit his purpose. Even if Owen Potter should attempt to bring assistance by shouting for help, he could be hurried off to safer parts before that call could be answered.

Then, too, Harper had little fear of such an outbreak, although he knew his captive was a far more dangerous man than one would judge, from his outward seeming alone.

"I reckon we'll squat and have a little argument over matters and things in general, Jasper Owen Potter Goodman," he said, with a deft movement sending the fat man's feet from under him and letting him to earth with a jarring thump. "Dropped something, pardner! Do you always sit down like that?"

Potter was too nearly breathless for speech, and dropping his bantering tone, Grip-sack Sid squatted by the side of his prisoner, with Simon Short close at hand in case of trouble, coldly speaking:

"Business now, my fine fellow! I've come all the way to Rocky Comfort to arrest Jasper Goodman for arson. I've found him, and now—"

"I'm not Jasper anybody! It's all a mistake. I'm Owen Potter, the most wretched man on top of the earth this night!" huskily muttered the late owner of the Sweet Home.

"Lying won't save your hide, Jasper, and the sooner you realize as much, the quicker the agony will be over. I've got you dead to rights. I know you are Jasper Goodman, five years ago of Kansas City. I've got a warrant for your arrest, and it's backed up with requisition papers. Everything is in legal shape, and if you're wise, you'll make it an easy job for me, in place of trying to bluff your way out."

"But I'm not the man you want, I tell you! I never lived in Kansas City! I never—I'm just Owen Potter!"

"You've got the head and face of a fool, Jasper, but I was in hopes you'd live up to your inside furniture, not try to pass on y'ur figure-head. I've got my man, as I said, but—unless you sing in tune, I'll never be able to get you out of Rocky Comfort alive!"

"Not—I don't even begin to know what you mean."

"Well, I've brightened up more than one set of dull wits, and I reckon I can place the truth before you so distinctly that even you will have to recognize it."

"To begin with, the Sweet Home was set afire. As you know, I was pretty much all through the house, and I can swear to the widespread smell of coal-oil."

"I know—a lamp exploded and started the fire," muttered Owen Potter, his voice growing clearer, steadier as his peril seemed to increase. "I heard the explosion, but before I could do anything—I was frightened almost to death, you know!"

"I know that death by fright is hardly the doom written against your name, Jasper," coldly interjected the detective. "They call such an accident arson, I believe. I know, too, that when arson is committed, and one or more deaths bear it company, another death is pretty sure to follow."

"I never set the fire! 'Twas a sheer accident!"

"Back in the States, where we pride ourselves on our civilization, Goodman, that death usually squares the accounts in legal style, but out here, with a population such as Rocky Comfort

can boast, there isn't so mighty much style, but—they get there just the same!"

"You can't prove anything! I deny that I'm guilty! You'll never dare stain your soul with murder—for murder it would be! Murder most rank! You dare not!"

A hand closed over those lips, and as Grip-sack Sid nodded, Simon Short obediently closed his long fingers lightly around Potter's neck. Lightly, as yet, but ready to close into a garrote if necessary!

"You prate of murder?" sternly said Harper, his eyes fairly glowing through the gloom with poorly suppressed rage. "Three precious lives were lost in that fire—a fire planned and executed by yourself, Jasper Goodman! At least two of those lives would outweigh countless millions such as yours! And one of them—Hold him fast, pardner," his voice growing choked. "I've got to catch a fresh breath, or I'll tear his devilish heart out with my naked fingers!"

Sidney Harper sprung away into the darkness, leaving Owen Potter in the firm grip of the tall man, who took advantage of that chance to slip in a word for the general good, as he deemed it.

"Play the keards as he shows ye, critter, or salt won't save ye!"

Grip-sack Sid quickly regained his self-control, and returning, took up the thread where it had broken off.

"It's enough to remind you that at least three lives were lost in your fire, Owen Potter. You've been near enough to the crowd all day, to guess what would be the result if I stood up and denounced that fire as surely incendiary; if I told the crowd this was simply a duplicate of the crime that drove you out of Kansas City before positive proof of your guilt turned up."

"I never—I call upon—"

"Choke him off, Simon!" sternly grated the detective, cutting short the blasphemous appeal which the wretch was about to make. "And you, Owen Potter, guilty or innocent, unless you want to pull hemp before the sun comes up again, must make full confession to us two men."

"Must I lie about it?" huskily mumbled Potter, as Simon relaxed his tight grip enough to permit his speech.

"No. You've lied enough. Tell the plain truth, for if you even try to bring forth the shadow of a lie, I'll spot you. I know pretty well the entire story, but I want you to supply a few missing links."

"I swear to you, sir, that I'm innocent!"

"And I swear that you lie. I know that you drugged the coffee and tea which you placed before your guests that night; at least for the Porters, father and daughter, and Mrs. Brandow. I know that you locked them all up in their rooms, breaking a key in each lock, to make doubly sure not one could escape the awful doom you resigned them to. I know that you started fire on both floors, making sure it would spread too rapidly for escape or rescue, and then—"

"No, no!" huskily cried Owen Potter, his nerve failing him at last. "He wanted me to, but we couldn't—"

"Too late for lies, Jasper Goodman! Confess all, or you surely hang!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SQUEEZING OUT FACTS.

A MUFFLED howl for mercy burst from the lips of Owen Potter, his nerve deserting him at those words, couched as they were in tones so full of deadly hatred.

Never before since he took up that perilous career, had Sidney Harper permitted his feelings to so completely get the upper hand of his judgment. It seemed as though he was committing a crime with each minute he let pass without exacting the fullest possible penalty for the death of Enid Porter.

If Felix Brandow had been at his feet, as Owen Potter was in those mad moments, death would surely have followed. And it was merely to rivet the chains about Felix Brandow, whom he still felt was the arch-villain, that Grip-sack Sid held his fierce passions in check.

"Tell the whole story, you devil's whelp!" he grated, savagely, his fingers quivering at the flabby throat of the terrified knave, plainly itching to bury themselves in the flesh. "Tell it all, from start to finish, or I'll turn you over to the mob, and do my level best to make them toast you over a slow fire!"

"Don't—I'll tell—I didn't do—"

"If you try to lie out of it, after this final warning, Jasper Goodman, I'll never grant you another chance for life."

"And if I tell? If I prove to you that I didn't—I wasn't nigh so bad as he wanted me to be?" faltered the frightened wretch.

"As who wanted you to be?"

"Brandow—devil toast him for—"

"Steady! Take care of your own sins, and leave others to pay shot as they deserve. Now—how much worse could you have been? For it surely wasn't through any kindness of yours that Mrs. Brandow escaped with her life, from the horrible fate which overtook her relatives!"

"But it didn't—they wasn't burned up!" spluttered Potter, once more in deadly fear for his

miserable life as those fingers began to draw nearer together.

Sidney Harper drew back with a choking breath. Not burned? Not dead? How could that be!

"Oot with it, you devil!" he snarled, coming back at Potter, more fiercely than before, if possible. "They were roasted! If not—where are they now?"

"Ef you skeer him too mighty bad, boss, I don't reckon he'll be able fer to tell it a-all," quickly interposed Simon Short, for once taking the initiative.

That hint acted on the detective much as a *douche* of ice-water. It showed him how wildly he was acting, and from that moment on, he was once more the clear-brained, steady-nerved Get-there Sharp.

"You've had your warning, Owen Potter. I've shown you I'm fairly well posted on facts and figures. Now—unless you're really anxious to see how a Rocky Comfort mob can do the rope act, tell your story in the fewest possible words. But—make it clear, and be prepared to back it up with proofs, if we see fit to call on you for such."

Owen Potter was completely cowed, and only thought of lessening his own punishment—or putting it off to a future day. The main fault to be found with him at first, was his trying to tell too much all in a breath; but as Harper had already gained a pretty accurate idea of the original plot from Helen Brandow, that did not matter so much.

Owen Potter followed the lines she had marked out, pretty closely, for a time, but then the change began to come in, and Harper listened with painful interest, longing yet not daring to hasten the knave, lest that growing hope be destroyed instead of confirmed.

If Potter told the truth, Felix Brandow was head and front of the original plot. He, Potter, was the first one taken into his confidence, and as the first outline was not nearly so black, he fell in with the scheme which promised such an immense pile of money for them both.

Brandow brought a couple of thugs from Chicago to do the "heavy work," and after a time he took Billy Carter into the ring.

"I didn't like that, for Billy was showy, but shallow. Still, Brandow made it clear some one had to take the lead as boss, and as I wouldn't, and as he couldn't, without endangering his prospects as one of the company, Billy was let in."

"Brandow never showed his hand to any but me. He never let on that he was the one who brought the boys from Chicago. When some one had to be put forward, Billy was made the figurehead."

"It wasn't until all other points were arranged, that Brandow out with his full plot. And, bad as I may be in your eyes, sir, that sickened me—sickened me to the very heart!"

"It's a terrible pity about your heart, Jasper Goodman!" coldly sneered the Get-there Sharp.

"But I'm not—if you say so, then!" abandoning his futile protest as Harper clicked the muzzle of a pistol against his teeth.

"Better: I know so. Go on, Jasper. You turned sick, I believe?"

"I did, whether you believe me or not," sulkily. "And then it was that we figured out the 'cross' we afterward played on Brandow. For, I forgot to say, I knew the thugs from Chicago, and they trusted me more than they did Billy Carter. And so, when Brandow laid down the law that all three of the other heirs must be heavily drugged, to sleep through the fire, why I seemed to give way—only seemed, don't I tell you, man?"

"You lie, and I warned you against it! You did drug them to their death, and now I'll—"

"Alive—both—prove it!" Potter managed to gasp, before his breath was entirely shut off.

Even then it might have been too late, only for Simon Short, who shifted his grip to the avenging arm of the Get-there Sharp, swiftly speaking:

"He says the gal's alive, boss! Don't—give him a show to prove it, fu'st! Fer—I really believe he's too mighty skeered to lie!"

The final sentence came after Grip-sack Sid relaxed his grasp and fell away a foot or two, and Owen Potter confirmed that bewildering hope with his next words.

"She's alive—he's alive—only Billy Carter died!"

Once more Harper smothered his intense emotions, and forced himself to listen, forced Potter to confess, until all was revealed.

As Paul Jackson, Felix Brandow set the plot in motion. As Paul Jackson, he enlisted the thugs and outlined their part of the play, then changed his identity by shaving off his full beard, dyeing his hair and mustaches black, knowing that the change would not prejudice him with the Porters, who had never met the husband of Helen in the flesh.

His scheme was to kill off all save himself; then he was sole heir to the wealth, and would share with his pals. Anthony and Enid Porter, with his wife, were to be drugged by Potter, then the hotel fired and their fate sealed beyond redemption.

"Instead of that, we concluded to give Bran-

dow the cross, and knock him out of the whole pile, if he kicked when he came to learn the truth. I did give the drug, to easy our work. I let in the boys near midnight, and then went away to prepare for the fire. They were to carry off all three—Brandow's wife as well as the Porters—to a snug den, where they might be kept until the rig was played and the boodle collared. And when I heard the signal to go ahead—I didn't mean to—the light fell and—"

"Steady, there!" sternly warned the Get-there Sharp. "Lying can only make matters worse, Jasper Goodman, and you'd ought to realize that by this time. You started the fire when they gave the signal?"

"It—it started—yes!" as the muzzle of a pistol rapped his lips sharply. "I started it, but—"

"Let your excuses wait until you are on trial, Jasper. You started the fire: so far, so good! You say your pals carried off the drugged people, but—how came it they left Mrs. Brandow behind?"

"I don't know," groaned Potter, hollowly. "I thought they meant to take her, too. That was what we agreed, before I consented to start the fire. I thought they had taken her, until I saw you fetch her out, last night. And then—it nearly turned me crazy, sir!"

"Because you thought you would be found out?"

"Because I feared I'd set the fire too soon, after all! But when I saw the boys this morning, they told me it was an accident: that the lock was out of fix, somehow, and they had to leave her or spoil the entire business."

"If the Porters, father and daughter, were carried off, how do you account for three bodies being discovered in the ruins?"

"Two were stiff, stolen from the graveyard by the boys, and held in readiness for the right night. The third—"

"Go on, Jasper: the third?"

"Was Billy Carter! He tried to ride his high horse, and they left him behind," desperately muttered Potter. "Mark Finn did it, I think."

"Does Felix Brandow know how you gave him the cross?"

"Not yet, but he will know to-night. He's going to see the boys, and I was to meet him there. But you nailed me, and—"

"Now then, where are Anthony and Enid Porter, Jasper?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LIKE A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

AT nearly the same time that Owen Potter fell into the grip of the Get-there Sharp, Felix Brandow was hastily approaching the shanty built against the hill in which Mark Finn and Tom White hung forth.

He was muffled up to the eyes, though the evening was warm, and his figure was bent until he seemed a full foot shorter than usual. In all ways he seemed desirous of avoiding recognition should he be seen by any one passing along.

He rapped sharply at the closed door, and after a slight interval the barrier was opened by Mark Finn, who silently made way for his caller to enter.

"Shut the door. Where's your mate?" he asked, in sharp, disagreeable tones as he turned in the middle of the room.

Finn shut the door and dropped the heavy bar into its iron socket. Then, facing Brandow, who had dropped his collar and straightened up, Mark took the pipe from between his teeth, staring at his visitor for a brief space in sullen defiance.

"On watch, of course. What else did you reckon?"

"Go a little slow, my fine fellow!" gratingly spoke Brandow, lifting a hand and shaking a finger before that dark, brutal countenance. "I'm hot under the collar already, and just a little more will make me sweat—bad!"

"If you're hot, there's plenty of out-doors for you to cool off in, I reckon," grunted Finn, leaning against the door, crossing his feet, and thrusting both thumbs under the belt which supported his weapons.

"Isn't it enough to make me hot, man? To have all arranged so neatly, then to come back and find it botched? Why, you infernal—"

"Dip lightly, you'd best," growled Finn, with a grim nod that sent a tiny shower of sparks from the bowl of his pipe. "I'm not so awful sure you've the right to kick, even if there was a botch out!"

"You know who I am?"

"I know you said you was the boss, but up to that time—only this afternoon—we reckoned the boss was the one who'd played the part ever since our coming here."

"Meaning Billy Carter, of course? Well, he was merely a tool, the same as yourself and White. I brought you here my own self."

"I reckon, now I come to look at you with my eyes open. But why didn't you stay to make sure the job was done according to your taste?"

"Because I paid my good money to men whom I thought I could trust to obey orders, particularly when everything was made smooth to their hands. And now—how come you to leave one woman so she could escape?"

"Well, you'll have to ask Billy that question,"

with a slow, ugly smile beginning to make his beard curl. "She was his portion. I took the other woman for mine, and Tom made sure of the old man. Didn't we do our share of the work all right?"

"No!" with a fierce oath that seemed hot enough to scorch his lips. "Where were you when that devil on wheels brought her out? Why didn't you make sure of both, since you couldn't make sure of her without him? If I'd been in your shoes—"

"You'd have had your hands full saving your own breath," grimly interposed Finn. "We each one took a door and made it safe. We waited inside until all the other guests were safe out—I helped hustle more than one down stairs through the smoke, my own self. We stuck to our posts, each man at his door, until we thought nothing but a salamander could live any longer in that smoky hell! Then we made a break for the rear, and I got out—just how, I'll never tell you, for I don't know! I do know, though, that it was a full hour before I could see a thing, and mighty nigh that long before I could breathe!"

"Yet that devil—Harper, he calls himself—must have did his work after you ran away?" snarled Brandow, suspicion glowing in his eyes and on his face. "If he could save, why couldn't you kill?"

"We did our level best, and if you're not satisfied—"

"Satisfied!" echoed Brandow, with another vicious oath. "How can I be satisfied when you let go the very worst of 'em all? Why, curse you both! she knows the whole game, by this! And—she knows enough to twist the rope around each one of our necks, too!"

"Not around mine," grimly nodded Finn. "'Round Potter's, maybe. He set the fire, you want to keep in mind. But if you're afraid of her talking too mighty much, why don't you tie a knot in her tongue your own self?"

"I paid you to see to that, didn't I?"

"And we did our best to turn the trick according to orders. When a man does that, the one who hires him has mighty little right to kick. If you want to bullyrag anybody, why don't you go for Potter? He's the one most to blame, if I heard the right story told over in town. They say the sport wouldn't have found anybody in the smoke, only for her screeching out and so guiding him."

"Then you think Potter played dirt?" hesitated Brandow.

"No, I don't say that. I'm not one to jump on a pal without first making dead sure he fully deserves it."

"A bit at me, eh?"

"Did you feel it, so quick?" grinned Finn, but then adding quickly, as though to cut off a possible retort: "What I do say is that if you must work your sweat off on anybody, Potter's the one you ought to pick out. He doped the drink, you know, and he ought to have made sure all hands swallowed enough to make the trick certain. If not—well, we opened each door before blocking it. We saw that our game was safe in bed, and sleeping. If we'd found one awake, or had any reason to suppose it was nothing more than a simple sleep, couldn't we have made all sure? Just as easy!"

"But you didn't!"

"Because Potter reported all going on velvet, and we didn't have to, according to the contract."

"Well, you may be right, Finn," a little reluctantly admitted Brandow, like one convinced against his will. "All the same, though, the very worst one of all has got clear! Now—who's going to dispose of her before she upsets everything?"

"Potter said she was your woman," slowly said Finn, fingering his beard while curiously gazing into that pale face.

Brandow laughed, shortly.

"Because she is my wife, may be the reason I know what her tongue can do, if left to swing freely!"

"What's Potter doing?"

"I don't know. I told him to meet me here, for I wanted him to help untangle the puzzle. If he fails to turn up, I'll—"

"Oh, you're too terrible savage, boss," with a low laugh. "If you gave him the office, besure he'll not forget it. He's so mighty bad scared already that he'll be afraid to kick up any more waves. Now, while we're waiting for him, I'd like to say a word or two about the old gent."

"You mean Jacobs?"

"Sure! 'Tother old 'coon is past making worry, but Jacobs, if that's his name—"

"What else should it be?"

"Don't be so mighty cranky, boss? Jacobs, I say, is acting mighty queer of late, and I'd like you to take a look at him, now you're here. 'Twon't take long, and we'll be through by the time Potter shows up."

"How, queer? There isn't anything gone wrong with him? If there should—quick!" with a vicious snarl in his tones, as Finn sluggishly moved across the room. "He's worth his weight in pure gold to us, a dozen times over."

"Oh, he isn't that bad, boss," replied Finn, as he fumbled at the logs forming the rear of the room, then swung open a cunningly hidden door,

revealing a narrow, dark passage, seemingly leading directly into the rocky hill back of the cabin.

He took no light with him, and all was dark when the logs swung to behind them, but neither man seemed at a loss how to make their way. Both seemed well acquainted with that narrow passage. Then, too, it was of no great length, soon opening into what could later be seen was a natural chamber in the rocks.

"Wait; steady—so!" whispered Finn, checking his companion at a point which suited his purpose. "I'll set up a light, so you can see for your own self."

He struck a match, lighting a lamp behind which was placed a tin reflector. He kept the wick low until fairly ignited, then quickly turned it high, casting a bright light through the entire chamber.

Felix Brandow was looking for Esau Jacobs, but instead of the man he expected to behold, that light fell fairly upon face and form of two others: of Anthony Porter, and Enid, his daughter!

He started back with a hoarse cry, dashing a hand across his eyes as though unable to believe his senses.

Then, cursing, he turned upon Mark Finn, snarling viciously:

"You devil! what does all this mean?"

"That I don't kill a woman for little money, when I can make more by saving her life! Steady, you fool!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RAKING THEM IN.

THE instant he turned on the light, Mark Finn had whipped forth a revolver, and now held Felix Brandow covered with its muzzle as he uttered that sharp warning.

But the man whom he had so thoroughly hoodwinked, driven to utter desperation by what he had seen and all he suspected, repeated that hoarse cry of savage revenge, losing sight of his own peril in his mad longing to get even with his treacherous tool.

"Say you will—now you've got it!" harshly laughed Finn, as he swiftly shifted the heavy pistol in his hand and leaped forward, sending a blow in advance that dropped Felix Brandow to the floor like a log of wood.

Through all this those two pale-faced captives had stared in silence, unable to do anything more, thanks to the stout thongs that held their limbs helpless and the manner in which their mouths were covered.

Enid gazed like one bound with horror, but Anthony struggled desperately to burst his bonds, clearly anticipating fresh peril for his dearly beloved child. Not once did that burly ruffian glance in their direction, but bent over his fallen employer, making sure his stroke did not require repetition.

"Good enough wouldn't satisfy ye, would it? Thought you could bully a man, like you're used to rag your common curs? And now—well, you and Billy Carter were extra wheels, neither useful nor ornamental when it come to plain traveling!"

Mark Finn, while mumbling to himself after this fashion, kept his hands at work, and having produced cords and a ready-shaped gag, all of which he had provided for this particular occasion, he quickly had Felix Brandow trussed up beyond the possibility of escape without friendly aid. Then, dragging him into a corner of the little cell opposite his other captives, he turned the light lower, and then left the den.

Fastening the cunningly contrived door behind him, leaving that prison a secret hardly to be surprised by even the keenest searcher, Finn left the cabin and struck briskly out through the night, his back toward Rocky Comfort, his face set for the hills.

Although cloudless, the night was fairly dark, there being no moon, and only the light of the stars to count upon, but Mark Finn showed no hesitation. He had made himself thoroughly familiar with the lay of the ground since coming to that section, and having a distinct purpose in view, he took the shortest method of getting at it.

The lights of Rocky Comfort were quickly lost to view as Mark Finn entered the hills, and before long he came to a portion of the country which had, in the earlier days of that camp, promised the richest reward to those who looked for fortunes in Mother Earth.

But that promise failed, and the weed-grown mouth of a shaft driven horizontally into the face of a high hill, at which Mark Finn paused to utter a peculiarly pitched whistle, was only one of nearly a score such, where dollars had gone in for cents coming out.

There was no response to his first signal, and after listening impatiently for a few seconds, Finn repeated the whistle, this time in a louder, shriller key.

An answer came, and with a growl combining anger and satisfaction, if not actual relief, the fellow entered the tunnel, groping his way through the dark until a tiny spark of light in advance gave his eye something to go by.

"Well, what's the best word, pardner?" called out a husky voice from just back of that red star, as Finn came closer.

"Where the devil do you keep your ears, Tom?" growled the other. "I had to fairly split my whistle, out yonder! If all Rocky Comfort drops down on our backs, you'll know who to blame for the job!"

"Oh, come off! You've been hittin' the bottle too hard, Finn. Did ye bring 'long a sniffer fer—durn sech a pal, anyway!" in tones of utter disgust as Mark brushed his eager hand aside without filling it as expected.

"I've brought good news, and that ought to fill you up better than bad whisky Tom," he said, with an ugly laugh.

"You don't mean—"

"But I just do! Got him trussed up like a fowl fit for roasting! And now, if we can put the screws on this covey, just right, what's to hinder our turning out as dandy high-rollers as the best of the tony sports, Tommy, my noble lad?"

This was a new phase in Finn's character, and White was not quite ready to respond to what he could not exactly recognize. So, chewing the cud of disappointment, he led the way, followed by his mate.

A short distance from where they had met, a side-tunnel branched off to the right hand, but seemingly it had hardly been begun before being abandoned for some cause or other, to us unknown. And here, where all progress seemed barred by a mixed mass of broken timbers, rocks and masses of dirt, Tom White more fully opened his lantern, giving them light sufficient to find the cunningly hidden entrance to yet another secret prison-house.

Mark Finn took the light from his pal's hand when they were fairly inside the gloomy, damp, contracted quarters, turning its rays squarely upon a human figure sitting with back supported by the earth wall, its hands and feet bound, and with a cloth folded over its mouth.

Even those who had so carefully scrutinized those joined slips of card, on one side of which the body of Esau Jacobs was represented, would hardly have recognized in this prisoner the original of that sun-picture: yet such it was.

"Getting tired of so much activity, pardner?" laughed Finn, a coarse grin broadening his face as he squatted on his heels directly in front of the prisoner. "Well, if you're wise enough to know a good thing when you see it, we'll mighty soon be getting down to a sound financial basis. For, of course, you can't expect gentlemen of our caliber to go through all these motions without somebody paying for the exertion?"

There was no reply in words, since speaking was an impossibility, so long as that bandage remained in place. But if eyes ever talk, then those eyes in Esau Jacobs's head were actually eloquent, just then!

"That's a lie, Esau, just as flat as though your lips had spit it out, full force!" nodded Finn, reading that glare aright. "Of course it makes you sweat a bit, looking back at it all—but—well, a man will think several times before giving up his life once! And that is just what this little affair amounts to, Jacobs."

"Brandow—or Jackson, as you knew him best—figured on killing you as the cheapest method of getting at your boodle, but that's too mighty brutal for a gentleman of my dimensions. So—if you pay out freely, and don't cause us too mighty much bother over coming to terms, you can live to spank your great grandchildren, for all I care!"

"But—pay you must, and pay you shall! If you reckon we can't bring you to Limerick, all you need do is stick out stubborn, and we'll begin the course of sprouts right off! Now, let me tell you one—"

"It's just struck—and you're the one!" cried a clear, mocking voice, as a heavy blow fell upon the head of the squatting knave.

Stunned but still dangerous, Mark Finn tried to draw a weapon, but he was in the hands and under the knees of a man who had subdued even worse characters in his time, and almost before he could divine that danger was near, his arms were twisted behind his back and cuffs of steel were snapped around his wrists.

"Want any help, Simon?" cried Grip-sack Sid, the instant his own man was secured; but even as the words passed his lips, he saw that the tall man had proved more than a match for him of the broad shoulders.

"Fer jest one critter? An' him a stunt at that? Not any, boss!"

Simon panted a bit as he spoke, but that may have been owing to excitement alone. Anyway, he had Tom White lying helpless as was his comrade in crime, Mark Finn.

Satisfied on this point, Grip-sack Sid lost no time in setting Esau Jacobs at liberty, but before that gentleman could even begin to express his thanks for the great service rendered, Simon Short had him tight clasped in his arms, dancing and prancing, talking and shouting and blubbing all in the same breath.

Grip-sack Sid drew back a bit, the glad smile broadening on his manly face as he watched. Little room for doubt, after this, but what they had found the mystery-loving Esau Jacobs!

It took some little time for Esau to fairly recognize that old friend in one of his rescuers, but when that recognition did come, he sure Simon was not alone in his joy.

"I say, Simon, don't you reckon it's pretty near time you was letting me have anyway one finger of our good friend?" at length drawled Harper, bringing that mad dance to a period.

Hardly knowing what words passed his lips, Simon Short tried to introduce them to each other, but Harper laughed, and Jacobs stared in a puzzled manner at the work he made of it.

"What name did he say, dear sir?" asked the rescued man, as their hands joined in an ardent pressure.

"Well, just call me the Get-there Sharp, if you don't mind, pardner!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW ALL HANDS "GET THERE."

THERE was no lack of excitement in store for the citizens of Rocky Comfort next day.

First, Owen Potter had disappeared as completely as though he had taken to himself wings, and set off in chase of his property which had scattered to the four winds, in the shape of smoke.

Next, those who were reported dead, were now declared to be still in the land of the living, and very little the worse for their double translation.

Then, "to make things more binding," as one of the citizens said, the manner in which Owen Potter's Sweet Home came to burn, was no longer a mystery. And, on top of all this, there seemed a very fair prospect for a "hanging bee!"

Of course all this excitement was mainly brought to the surface by the Get-there Sharp, who certainly had put in a good night's work, not only for himself, but for and against others.

To make all points clear, it will be enough to touch lightly on the various items of that long schedule.

Owen Potter finished his confession by telling where Anthony and Enid Porter had been stowed away; and here came forth another proof of mark Finn's grim sagacity. Just as he had fooled Felix Brandow, just so he intended to deceive Potter. And while the ex-landlord believed and declared that the Porters were concealed in that deserted mine, while Esau Jacobs was hidden back of the little cabin near the hill, the Chicago thugs had reversed these conditions.

First resolving to make sure of the thugs Grip-sack Sid and Simon Short, after stowing Owen Potter away in a snug hiding-place, hastened to the cabin, nearing it just in time to see Finn open and close the secret door which Potter had described.

They followed him without delay, fearing harm would come to Enid or her father in case they attempted to set Jacobs free first. And guided by the unsuspecting knaves, they "got there" in good style, as already described.

Leaving Finn and White securely bound and gagged, Grip-sack Sid led the way back to the cabin, where a double surprise awaited them.

Enid and her father were found alive and comparatively well, but on the rough floor lay Felix Brandow—a corpse!

Doubtless Finn had dealt a heavier blow than he intended, for if murder had really been his purpose, he would have made sure before leaving his victim. Instead, he applied bonds and a gag, no doubt expecting to find Brandow alive on his next visit.

Before the Blossom House was reached, Esau Jacobs was Esau Jacobs no longer, but Lionel Porter, brother and uncle. After all he had suffered since first forming that eccentric plot to secure a really trustworthy heir or heiress, he was not likely to undertake such another foolish scheme.

Grip-sack Sid brought the three living conspirators together that same night, with the Marshal of Rocky Comfort as a witness. He played one knave against another, blocking all lies by the knowledge he had picked up himself, and only giving over his efforts when the whole atrocious plot was laid bare.

Owen Potter came out of the struggle still blacker than he had at first been forced to admit himself, but Grip-sack Sid claimed him as his especial captive, backing up his demand by showing all necessary papers from high officials. In return he blandly assured the marshal that both Mark Finn and Tom White, the Chicago thugs, were entirely at his disposal.

"Of course you'll do your duty, marshal," he added, with a curious smile playing about his lips the while. "But—I'm afraid you'll have your hands just a little bit more than full, to keep the noose off their necks long enough for a regular court to pass sentence on them for their crimes!"

"Well, I'll do my level best!"

No doubt the marshal so intended, and possibly he thought, when a crowd which comprised nine-tenths of the able-bodied citizens of Rocky Comfort, offered to relieve him of his burden, that it was no part of his duty to kill good men to save the lives of bad ones.

At any rate, his "guns" were still free from powder-stains when, long before the sun won its meridian, Mark Finn and Tom White "went up a tree!"

To dispose of the third criminal as briefly as possible, it may be said here that, taking only

those into his confidence whom he knew he could implicitly trust, Grip-sack Sid chartered a stage and made all possible haste to get Jasper Goodman—once Owen Potter, of the Sweet Home—out of that section.

Simon Short and Dan Gregg went with him as special guards, and on the box was Topsy Todd, handling the ribbons after his own skillful manner. And, to cut it still shorter, Jasper Goodman, less than six months later, paid the full penalty due his atrocious crime.

As for Helen Brandow, she never rejoined her relatives. She had sincerely repented the part she had played in their trials, but she dared not face Enid after what had taken place.

Tom Early brought the news of her husband's death, and that news seemed to lend the heart-sick woman fresh vitality. She left her bed and left the house. She left Rocky Comfort, as well, though none seemed to know just how, or just when, for a number of days. Then the driver of the Turtle Rock section reported having picked up a woman along his route, who must have been Helen.

Whither she went after leaving the stage at Turtle Rock, her relatives never found out. She vanished from their lives as utterly as if she had taken her own. Yet none of them really believed this. She was too strong, too full of health and spirit to commit suicide.

So they hoped for the best, and let a kindly veil drop over Helen Brandow's failings.

When the Porters left Rocky Comfort, Maurice Henley bore them company. For, although Anthony Porter had been unjustly prejudiced against the young man who loved, even as he was beloved by, Enid Porter, when he learned how desperately Henley had fought a fiery death in his efforts to rescue his loved one, the father could not hold out longer.

Before they left Rocky Comfort, Mrs. Early and Tom were both richly rewarded for the help they had unwittingly been to the Get-there Sharp in solving that puzzling case. And Fred Meyers, too, was remembered by Enid.

After the Porters reached their home in the East, Lionel, now far more cheerful than he had been for years, was persuaded by his brother and niece to consult an eminent specialist in heart troubles, who bluntly called him an idiot for fancying he was doomed to an early death through that much maligned organ.

"Get married, raise a lot of children, and they'll keep such nonsensical notions out of your head!" he declared, adding, with a wry grimace which may have revealed one of his own secrets: "Or, if they don't, you can rest assured your wife will!"

And yet, Lionel Porter has steered clear of that portion of the prescription relating to wife and children. He says his fortune shall go to Enid and her children, after he has paid Sidney Harper a lump sum for the services that gentleman rendered them all.

And Simon Short? Still on deck, and a greater admirer of "Esau Jacobs" than ever. And he brought a report from Grip-sack Sid, when the trial of Jasper Goodman was finished.

"He says, little rosebud, that if you'll send him a invite to the wedding, he'll do his level best to 'Get-there, Sharp!'"

THE END.

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